



BACCANO!

1933 <Last> The Slash -Bloody to Fair-

**RYOHGO
NARITA**

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
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RYOHGO NARITA
ILLUSTRATION BY KATSUMI ENAMI



Lamia

"Did you hear, Chri? They say old Szard cashed in his chips!"
"Cashed in his chips?"
"Right. In other words, somebody 'ate' him!"
"Then did what's-her-name—Ennis—die, too?"
"They're checking on that now."
"I see... Still, to think that crafty immortal would get eaten."
"I bet that means the old man got to be human again at the end. Well, he was part of great, noble, sublime, magnificent Nature from birth. Unlike us, who came into being as the unnatural personified."
"Quite the masochist, aren't you? Although you're right."
"Yes. In death, that old man returned to Nature. But what about us? There's no telling whether death will be enough reason for Nature to accept us. Don't you agree, Adele?"
"...I don't really understand that sort of thing. I only carry out the tasks I'm given..."
"That's cold, don't be like that. What did you forget what Huey did to you in that lab for years and years?"
"...I don't want to go back there, never again, not for anything, not there..."
"See? It's so sickening it gives you the shakes, doesn't it? You never want to be in a situation that unnatural again, do you? Ha-ha-ha, ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"That's enough, Christopher. You're the one who doubts himself the most."
"Well, that's obvious, isn't it? It's obvious. Of course! Doesn't it ever trouble you? We've killed people I don't know how many times, killed and killed and killed and killed and killed, but no matter how we interfere with the world, in the end, we care far more about it than it cares about us. The hopeless inferiority we feel next to humans just keeps growing."
"There's no help for that. That's all there is for us."
"But listen, Chri, Adele—I've been thinking. I don't imagine we'll get an answer to the question of whether we're really human by worrying."
"Oh."
"So I thought up a shortcut. We won't get close to humans; we'll surpass them! That way, at least we won't have to feel inferior anymore, and we'll be able to rest easy. Right?"
"You're talking nonsense again... But how would we prove we're superior to humans, anyway?"
"Well, let's see. In imitation of the hierarchy of the natural world, the law of the jungle—we'll just kill the strongest human there is!"
"We'll surpass human limits."
"Don't you realize? That idea puts an incredible distance between you and the world. Although, that foolish fantasy really is everything to you..."



Claire

Cheers...

I can hear their praise.

Ahh, that feels great.

It feels fantastic.

This is the only place where the world is absolutely, positively mine. Up on this rope.

People who don't know me are watching me, watching my skills.

I bet I know what they're thinking:

If he can pull off something that amazing, he must have put in a lot of practice. He must have worked hard.

That's right. You bet I did.

Yes, these cheers acknowledge me.

They acknowledge what I've accumulated.

People who do know me always say stuff like:

"Must be nice to have talent."

"He can get anything without even trying."

"He was chosen by God."

It's all hokey.

I don't believe in God, so obviously, there's no way he'd choose me.

These cheers are the fruits of my labor.

I created this world.

Of course, the show came together through the efforts of the director and my coworkers, too.

Still, in this moment, these cheers are directed exclusively at me.

Yes, in the midst of these exultations, I most definitely exist. That's why I've worked so hard: to be sure of myself.

Not yet.

It's not enough.

Humans have no limits.

More.

Build up more experience, more effort, more of myself.

To aim for even greater heights—

If I were the one to stand at the very pinnacle of humanity—

Just go higher, that's all. Up and up and up.

There's no limit when it comes to "the top."

You can keep going up forever.

That's what humans are.

No—

That's what I am.



Maria

...Who's there? Who are you?
"I'd like to ask you that very same question."
I'm Maria. I'm a hired killer.
"I see. It all makes sense now. Mr. Maloney wasn't killed by a homicidal lunatic; his life was ended for a rational reason."
What? Why are you so calm? You sure you don't need to run away? Somebody just died right in front of you. You've got a hitman here, you know?
"If you're a hired gun, then you no longer have any reason to kill me, do you? Provided that no one's commissioned my death as well, that would change matters."
No, I don't know anything about you. Unfortunately, though, you did see me.
What should I do, hmm? Eh-heh-heh.
"I wonder how many people would believe me if I told them he was cut down by a young girl with a samurai sword."
You have a point.
"He was your first kill, wasn't he?"
...Huh?
"Observing people is a politician's job, you see. Your hands are trembling, your eyes are excited, and you're bantering to hide it. That's enough to tell me... Let me amend what I said just a moment ago. You do seem to have the makings of a murderer."
What makes you say that?

"Because that trembling of yours is half unease and half delight."
...
"Mr. Maloney resisted, and you cut him down. I'm not resisting. There is nothing to be gained by cutting me now."
Wait just a minute!
"There's no need, and I have no such obligation. I'll use Mr. Maloney's death for my own ends. I'd advise you not to do anything else unprofitable. Such an act... may be in line with your instincts, but it goes against the principles of our capitalist society."
That's all the guy said, and then he just walked off somewhere.
He was incredibly creepy.
...Not that I was scared or anything.
I mean it, all right? Believe me, amigo.
...Sorry. I lied.
I actually was a little scared of that politician.
His name? I remember it, amigo. It was in the papers the next day with his picture; they said he was a witness... Although they said the killers were the local mafia, not me.
I'm pretty sure the name was, um...Perine, or Berial—something like that!

The Present

Miria

Isaac, look, look! This bunny finally likes me!
“Lucky you, Miria. I still can’t get these doves to come out of this top hat.”

- Maybe they really like it in there?
“They were so obedient when they went in, but it’s already been three days since then. Rrgh, I spread newspaper in the bottom so they’d be comfortable; maybe I made it too comfy...”

Yes, it’s doves at full gallop!

“AaaaAAAAaah?!”

Waaah! Wh-what is it, Isaac?!

“The doves! They’ve laid eggs in my hat!”

Ooh! They made a nest, didn’t they?!

“Curses. This is no time for hocus-pocus.”

Isaac! That’s amazing!

“Huh? What is?”

All you had in that hat were doves, but eggs appeared out of nowhere!

“...Wow! A magic trick?!”

There were really and truly no tricks or gimmicks inside, but voilà! New eggs!

“Well, I’ll be! Did I actually create new life?!”

You’re a genius magician, Isaac!

“I’m fantastic! Let’s do a show right away!

You be the audience, Miria. Watch these eggs closely until they hatch!”

Yes, it’s the world’s longest magic show!

—But listen, Isaac.

I’m witnessing a magic trick that’s far, far more amazing. I’m watching a much longer show.

I should have died that day, and I didn’t think I’d ever smile again, but look how happy you’ve made me.

It just goes on and on. I’m always watching your magic, Isaac...

I’m sure there aren’t any tricks or gimmicks behind my love for you, either, you know?

Into the future, always and forever, for eternity...

BACCANO!

1933 <Last> The Slash -Bloody to Fair-

VOLUME 7

RYOHGO NARITA

ILLUSTRATION BY **KATSUMI ENAMI**



NEW YORK

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BACCANO!, Volume 7: 1933 <LAST> THE SLASH -BLOODY TO FAIR-RYOHGO NARITA Translation by Taylor Engel Cover art by Katsumi Enami This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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CHARACTERS

Tick Jefferson	The Gandor Family torturer. Uses scissors. Smiles constantly.
Tock Jefferson	Tick's younger brother.
Maria Barcelito	A guest of the Gandor Family. An ingenuous Mexican girl. A contract killer who uses <i>katanas</i> .
Luck Gandor	The youngest of the three brothers who run the Gandor Family. Not cut out for the mafia. Immortal.
Isaac Dian & Miria Harvent	Two people, one character. Immortals. No explanation necessary.
Firo Prochainezo	A young Martillo Family executive. Immortal. Fights with a knife.
Ennis	A rent-free lodger at Firo's house. A girl of marriageable age who's also part of Firo's body. Immortal. A skilled martial artist.
Maiza Avaro	The Martillo Family <i>contaiuolo</i> . An agreeable, mild-mannered young man. An immortal and former alchemist.
Ronny Schiatto	The Martillo Family <i>chiamatore</i> . The most dangerous man in the syndicate. His true strength is an unknown quantity. Demon.

Pezzo	A Martillo Family executive. Fat guy. Nicknamed Meatball. Immortal.
Randy	A Martillo Family executive. Scrawny guy. Nicknamed Ghost. Immortal.
Dallas Genoard	Human scum.
Eve Genoard	Dallas’s little sister. Her personality is the polar opposite of her brother’s.
Jacuzzi Splot	The leader of a gang of young thugs. Although he has a tattoo that covers half his face, he’s incredibly timid.
Nice	Jacuzzi’s companion and girlfriend. A mad bomber who wears glasses over an eye patch. Speaks politely to everyone except Jacuzzi.
Jon & Fang	Jacuzzi’s friends—an Irishman and a Chinese guy. A bartender-and-cook duo.
Donny	Jacuzzi’s friend. A giant, monstrously strong Mexican man.
Chané Laforet	Jacuzzi’s friend. A silent knife user who’s physically mute. Former terrorist.
Huey Laforet	A terrorist who was wanted across the U.S. Currently in police custody. An immortal and former alchemist.
Tim	The leader of Larva, a group that works for Huey.
Adele	A member of Larva. A woman who’s timid, always seems nervous, and uses

“Vino”

a cross-shaped spear.

Nicholas

A hitman who haunts Manhattan. Monster. Also known as the Rail Tracer.

Elean

An information broker. Chief editor at the Daily Days and English edition copy editor.

Henry

An information broker. A black guy with sharp mood swings. Wears Chinese clothes for some reason.

Rachel

An information broker. Human scum No. 2.

President

An information broker. An errand girl who travels all over the country, collecting information.

Christopher Shaldred

The head of the information brokerage. Hides in the shadows of his documents. He’s a bit of an urban legend. Only the vice president has ever seen him.

Hong Chi-Mei

A member of Lamia, a subgroup of Larva. A Nature-loving knife-gun user with a distinctive face.

Leeza

Asian. A member of Lamia. Christopher’s friend. A surly iron-claw user.

Sham & Hilton

A member of Lamia. An eerie being who appears as the languid “voice” of a woman.

Mysterious entities who seem to be members of Lamia. Christopher and company call them “the twins.”

Senator Manfred

Mary Beriam

Money-grubber.

The senator's daughter. Although her father is mad for money, she's a simple, honest girl who isn't the least bit arrogant.

Corporations truly are like living creatures.

Ours is no exception.

It is nearly impossible to manage everything about the body using only the brain and, by extension, one's own consciousness. The parts that govern the unconscious aggregate; the body as a whole; individual cells; internal organs... each engage in extraordinary biological activity in places to which our awareness does not extend. There is no knowing whether this is for the sake of the body entire or for the cell itself, but in any case.

The same is true of corporations: Each individual staff member exerts themselves voluntarily—for the good of the company, or for the sake of their own livelihood—in places the executives' hearts know nothing of.

However. Just as the "mind," which is merely a portion of the human brain, can abruptly end its own life, in the entities known as corporations, staff members can be cut down by strong feelings from those at the top.

...While capitalizing on the fact that the cells' voices do not reach them.

No doubt people commit suicide for a variety of reasons, but in most cases, when a corporation plants a blade in a part of itself, it does so in order to survive.

That's right: Just as humans wish for eternal life, corporations occasionally possess the same desire.

Eternal growth.

Here at Nebula, that is our corporate philosophy.

The people of Babylonia once defied God.

Like their Tower of Babel, we strive endlessly for the heights.

That said—the Tower of Babel crumbled away.

In the end, I suppose, it was merely a building.

Nevertheless...we are not a simple amalgamation of stone or brick.

Our goal is to continue our growth eternally, as a living creature.

I believe there is far more meaning in that than in simply gaining eternal life.

Ha-ha, my apologies.

All this assumes that someone has managed to obtain eternal life, of course.

Now then, as I think you are aware, we have developed—or absorbed—a variety of business territories since our founding.

It is possible for our corporation, working alone, to assemble nearly all commercial systems necessary to human society.

If one views society as a living organism, our corporation can also be said to live.

Instead of blood, we shed assets, and in place of oxygen, we breathe the smiles of people who now live in comfort.

That is what we are, the shape of Nebula.

...You have demanded we loan you some of that money, our blood.

What exactly does that mean?

It's quite simple, Mr. Turner. It means you will also become part of our body.

Still, do be careful.

Many of Nebula's executives are high-strung individuals.

Overlong hair, dirty grime that falls from the skin...

Do not forget that cells that are not useful to the body are thrown away with no hesitation, like garbage.

Now then, on that understanding, regarding the amount we are able to loan you— Dear me... There's no need to be so tense.

Show us the passion you displayed when you screamed you would take Nebula to court.

...If you are feeling poorly—would you care for some liquor of immortality?

Mind you, it is rather expensive...



LINKING CHAPTER

DOCUMENTS AND INFORMATION, STORM AND TERRORISTS

The *Daily Days* newspaper President's office Evening "Things have gotten interesting. Yes, this strikes me as a truly interesting, intriguing situation."

Sheaves of documents, piled into a massive heap.

The room they occupied was filled with the sound of rain from outside, and a subtle humidity was seeping into the paper. The telephone bells that usually rang incessantly were perfectly still now.

From the innermost depths of this room, which overflowed with paper stacks and the pitter-patter of falling droplets, there came an incredibly easygoing voice.

"To think the gang from the good old, bad old Flying Pussyfoot has gotten callers from the Martillos and the Gandors, of all people... Even characters under the influence of 'the seeker' Huey Laforet have gotten involved..."

"This is only going to be entertaining as long as it stays somebody else's problem, President."

A young guy with blond hair spoke to the mountain of documents, criticizing the voice coming from behind it for its irrepressible curiosity.

"I don't want another mess like last New Year's. Speaking as a rank-and-file staff member who gets slave-driven for peanuts every month..."

"I'm not so sure. You may say that, but you're enjoying this a little, aren't you? If you weren't, you wouldn't have chosen to be in this room right now."

As if in response to the subordinate's griping, part of the mountain of documents collapsed.

"You may be a staff member in the editorial department, but not while you're in here. Here, you're an individual named Nicholas Wayne, and you are a full-

fledged information broker.”

A newspaper that was also an “information broker,” which manipulated the ups and downs of various lives.

In this document-littered office, which could be considered the symbol of the place, several men stood in a row, each wearing a different expression. The paper disaster was so serious that there seemed to be no place to stand, but nonetheless, they’d dexterously found places to put their feet and now stood facing the Great Wall of Paper.

From the depths, in a spot where none of the others could see him, the president of the information bureau began to relate “somebody else’s problems” as if he were enjoying them right this minute.

“All right, let’s do a brief review. We’ll organize this incident briskly, simply, and clearly, just like carving up an apple pie.”

“I only wish it were something that appetizing.”

Sighing lightly, Nicholas began to give an outline of the incident matter-of-factly: “Well, it all began with that business on the Flying Pussyfoot. Jacuzzi Splot and his friends rode that train in, and they set up shop here in New York, which is the root cause of all this. Of course, if their business had been legal, there wouldn’t have been any problems, but...”

Nicholas smiled wryly. Picking up where he’d left off, the black man who stood beside him spoke up cheerfully. “Ha-ha-ha and ha, there’s no way. There’s absolutely no way, I tell you! A band of kiddie thug wannabes as large as that group, finding work in this Depression? Impossible! That’s the sort of thing—the only thing—on which God is fair, even today: Not even thugs and children can escape the Depression. Such inequality does not exist, sad to say.”

“Shut up, Elean.”

Elean, the black guy, gave an exaggerated shrug and addressed the man with glasses who stood on Nicholas’s other side.

“I was only expressing a logical view. At any rate, the Gandors and the Martillos both sent people to punish those mischievous scamps, correct? That’s right, isn’t it, Henry?”

“Yes. However, the group already had visitors. Members of Larva, one of the many terror organizations created by the unparalleled mastermind Huey Laforet, were attempting to contact Jacuzzi and his friends... That said, I myself am the one who gave them information about Jacuzzi Splot. What they wanted was information regarding a group of hooligans who were not affiliated with any mafia syndicate yet had a certain amount of muscle.”

That brought them back to the beginning, and the genie of the documents spoke up.

“Then, when all the varied forces had assembled, there was some sort of clash. Afterward—as the reports said, something that appeared to be a smoke screen rose from the house, and everyone inside took the opportunity to scatter... You’re all with me so far, correct?”

No sooner had the president finished speaking than Elean said, mystified, “No, no, no, that can’t be everything, President. You went to the trouble of getting us together to talk about this; you must have some other information, right?”

“No, at this point, that’s it. It does look as though a couple visited Jacuzzi before Larva came to call...but I expect they were friends of his.”

“Huh? Then why did you go to all this—?”

“Huey Laforet,” the president stated quietly but firmly. “He’s involved. That’s enough, all by itself. At the very least, it would be best to familiarize yourselves with the outline of the affair now.”

“...But he’s already under arrest.”

“Then let me ask you this.”

Speaking as if he were testing the other man, the voice from the depths of the documents began to state the facts, simply: “He’s been under arrest for over a year and a half...so why is it that practically no information has come in since then? It’s almost as if they’re trying to make the public forget he exists.”

“ ... ”

At that, all the information brokers in the room fell silent.

Huey Laforet was a terrorist who had once caused a significant public disturbance. He'd been collared by the police for the crime of amassing a vast arsenal of weapons and attempting to overthrow the government. At present, however, there was no sign of a follow-up investigation, and nothing—no results, not even its progress—had been reported about the trial.

Rumor had it that he was being held in the military prison on Alcatraz. Only this information, which was like something out of an urban legend, had reached Nicholas and Henry's group.

"It just means that, for the United States, this Huey character is that special a case. In the first place, Huey Laforet doesn't care that he's been arrested. On the contrary, it may all be one of his plans, police custody included... In the full knowledge that, afterward, his Lemures henchmen would be completely wiped out."

"No, but... But why?"

"Who knows? Of course this is mere guesswork, but from what I know, Huey definitely isn't the type to balk even slightly at making a sacrifice like that. That aside...I wonder if the members of Larva are aware that Chané Laforet, their boss's daughter, is currently with Jacuzzi and his companions."

It had been said offhandedly, but it was an incredibly important fact. The president went on. "Now then: Is there anything else that particularly warrants explanation?"

Prompted, Henry adjusted his glasses. "With all due respect, President, it looks as though the situation may be confused further—or possibly brought to an immediate conclusion."

"Oho. What sort of information might that be?"

"...Vino is on the move."

"!!"

Vino. At that word, the temperature in the room dropped sharply.

"The Rail Tracer—"

"The *former* Claire Stanfield—"

“The *current* Felix Walken—”

Nicholas and Elean listed off names one after another. Mentally, though, they were picturing only one person.

Facing those two, Henry continued his report, looking a little smug.

“We’ve received a report that one of Jacuzzi’s underlings left for Felix Walken’s accommodations, then took him back to his companions.”

“The hitman? Why would he...?”

“Because Chané Laforet is involved, and they’re engaged. I suppose it’s really only natural.”

“Engaged?”

The president answered Nicholas’s question from behind the mountain of documents.

“Ha-ha. That’s a long story, so we’ll save it for next time. The reunion of the hitman and the terrorist is far too lengthy and eventful to relate here.”

At that point, the president paused, then changed the subject as if he were talking to himself.

“Still. Well, well... I thought it was a trivial disturbance, apart from the fact that Huey was involved, but I’m getting a hunch it may develop into something pretty fascinating.”

Just as the voice behind the documents was growing animated, a light knock echoed in the room.

“It’s Rachel.”

A young woman’s voice spoke outside the door, and the president answered in tones that were still excited: “Ah, we’ve been waiting. Come on in.”

At that, the door to the president’s office swung open casually, and the woman entered. When he saw the person who’d announced herself as “Rachel,” Nicholas looked a bit surprised.

“You’re back?”

“...Came in on the evening train.”

Rachel muttered the words with a vaguely gloomy expression, then crossed to an open space in the center of the room.

“Did something happen?” he continued. “You look glum.”

“...I saw an ominous group on the train.”

“An ominous group?” Elean asked.

In response, Rachel spoke as if she were spitting the words out in distaste: “There’s no doubt about it. It was...Lamia.”

“Lamia...”

All the information brokers in the room traced the word back to its meaning, but aside from the original sense of “vampire,” it didn’t seem to ring a bell for Nicholas and the others.

Only the individual behind the paper mountain spoke, sounding entertained.

“How about that... Christopher’s Lamia is in New York?” After a moment’s pause, the president concluded, “I suppose it’s safe to assume they’re meeting up with the members of Larva. There’s really no need to even think about it. Still, I’m impressed you could tell they were Lamia just by being near them.”

“I’d never seen them before, and at first I almost thought they were some sort of circus, but...I’d heard rumors everywhere at my destination. With looks that striking, it’s hard not to recognize them.”

“Ah yes, I see. So Christopher was with them, too.”

“Yes. How should I put it...? The moment I saw him, it brought back memories of the Flying Pussyfoot.”

Rachel was gazing into the distance with eyes that held a mixture of loathing and nostalgia.

“How many were there?”

“I only saw two, Christopher and an Asian man. If the information is accurate, though, there should be at least a few more.”

“Yes, Lamia is a small group to begin with, and one of their members is apparently already in New York.”

The pair seemed to be satisfied, and Nicholas broke into their conversation with a complaint. “Hey, time out. Don’t just move the discussion along by yourselves over there.”

“Ah, beg pardon...”

Meekly apologizing to his subordinate for his carelessness, the president began to encourage the proceedings along. “All right, this has gotten good: Not only has the notorious Vino joined in, but the ‘vampire’ Christopher Shaldred is participating... Those two, squaring off— Or, no, if you include Ronny Schiatto from the Martillos, it’s a three-way standoff. Ha-ha! My friends, this incident may turn out to be more intriguing than we expected, don’t you think?”

Putting a damper on their boss, who was getting worked up all by himself, Nicholas openly asked something he’d been wondering about: “Christopher Shaldred... I’ve never heard that name.”

“Oh, I see. The only ones who know about Christopher are myself, the vice president, and Rachel, who’s constantly traveling. After all, he—or rather, “they”—are like a migrating urban legend... This is the group’s first visit to New York, so it’s no wonder you don’t know about him.”

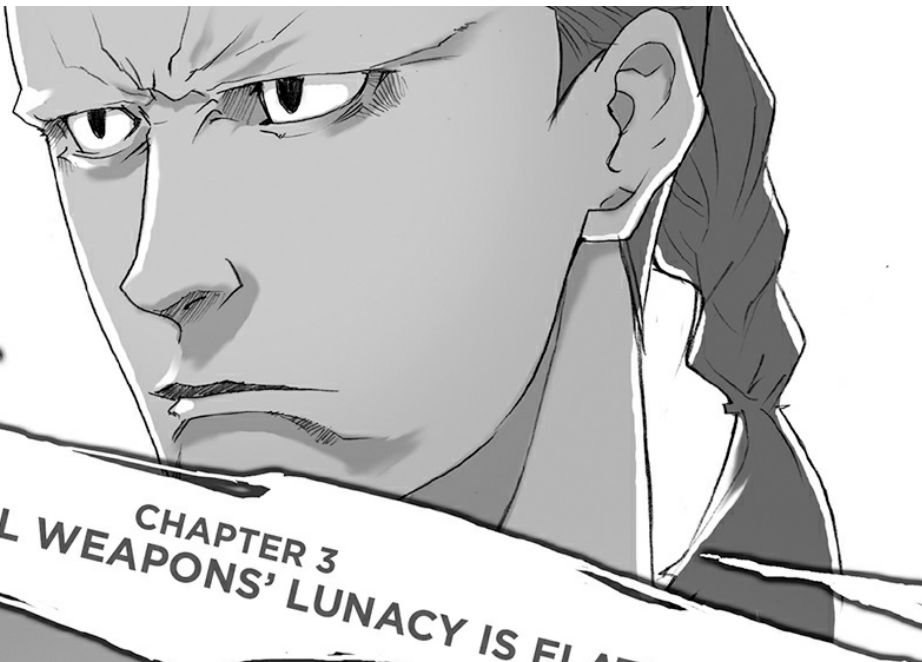
Seeming to feel that he’d blundered, the voice from behind the documents started to describe a certain individual.

“Very well. In that case, let’s begin by talking about Christopher...”

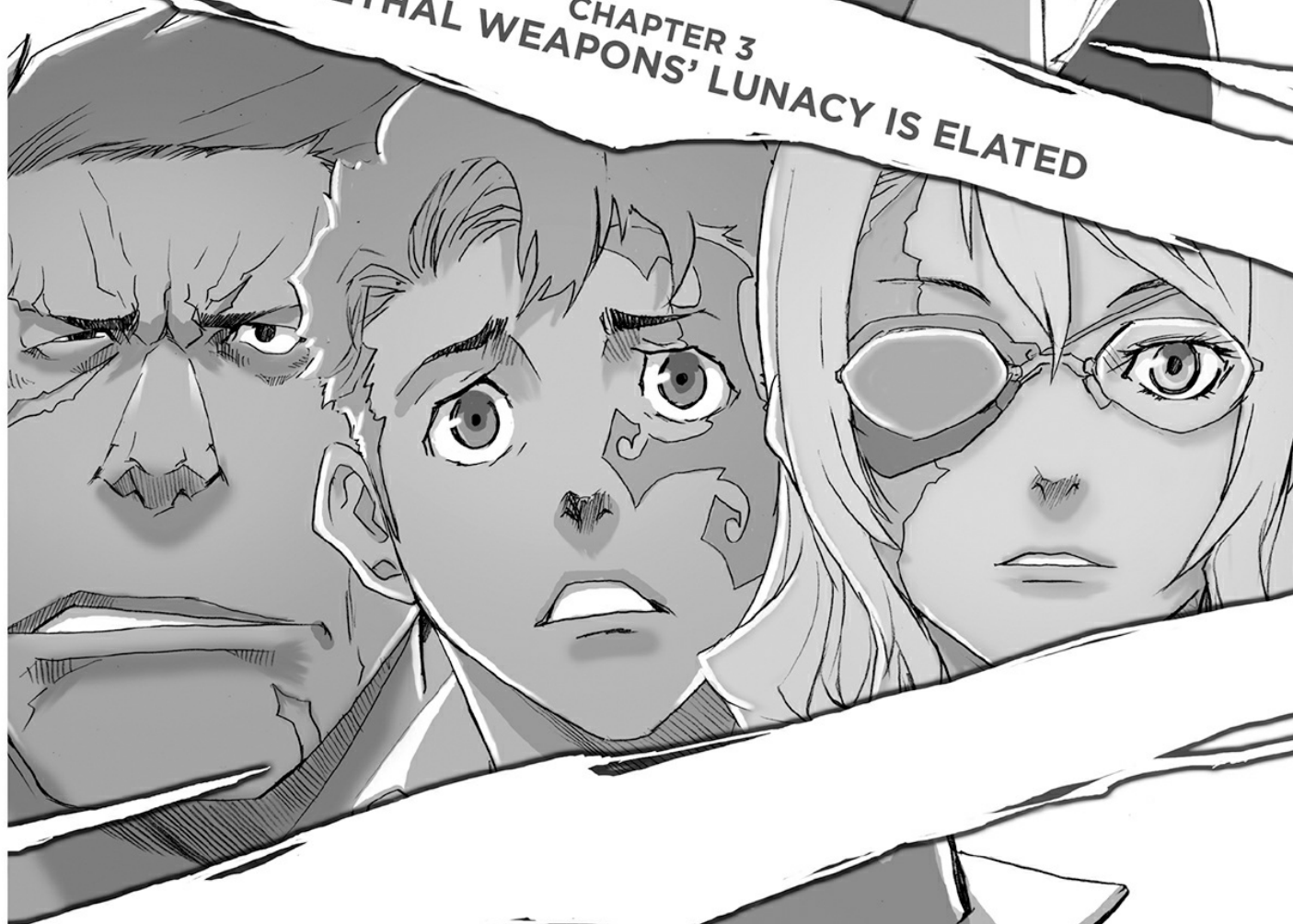
An information broker dealt in vast quantities of information, treating it as his own property, and the individual who led the organization managed that information like a director would his actors.

In a voice that seemed to say all the players were in place, the genie of the documents began to speak cheerfully, to the accompaniment of the rain drumming on the windows.

“Christopher Shaldred. Let me start by talking about this man, as a prologue to the ‘something’ that is about to begin...”



CHAPTER 3
THE LETHAL WEAPONS' LUNACY IS ELATED



CHAPTER 3

THE LETHAL WEAPONS' LUNACY IS ELATED

A few days earlier Nighttime Chicago A warehouse district on the shore of Lake Michigan The moon was beautiful this evening.

It was the day the deal was scheduled to take place.

The Russo Family, which was being strangled by the surrounding big mafia syndicates, was on the verge of suffocation.

In an attempt to pull themselves back from the brink of disaster, they'd chosen to trade in drugs with the Asian mafia from another district.

The Russo Family had been cornered so badly that they had no choice but to upset the order in the back alleys.

Tonight, they were going to conduct their biggest transaction yet. However...

"Ah... Flowers sure are pretty..."

Soft moonlight illuminated the warehouse district. In a gap between the many warehouses built on the shore of Lake Michigan, a little dirt showed through the cracks in the concrete—and a flower was blooming in it.

Just one flower.

A solitary, blossoming fragment of the natural world, hemmed in by gray on all sides.

A young man was crouched in front of that tiny, tiny flower, and he was muttering.

"Ah... The color is pretty... The shape is pretty... My, my, despite its birth in a place like this, it didn't give up on life, and it even put out a flower, so its very existence is really, truly beautiful..."

The moonlight shone on his gentle expression, creating a cool harmony with the flower blooming in front of him.

Just one thing.

If there was just one thing that felt off, it was— “Hey... I told you—you’re in the way.”

“Are you nuts or something?”

—the crowd of stern men that stood behind him.

There were about a dozen of them, and they were all glaring at the young guy with open hostility.

However, their imminent victim wasn’t letting it get to him. He continued to gaze at the flower with the same mild expression.

“So pretty...”

“Are you listening t’ me? Hunh?”

One of the men stood behind the guy, grabbed the back of his collar, and hauled him up.

The young man was wearing clothes that made him look like a medieval aristocrat, and they couldn’t have clashed more badly with the surrounding atmosphere. Their one saving grace was that, being mostly black and red, they harmonized nicely with the darkness.

The guy, who’d been dragged to his feet, turned his head to look behind him. He was still wearing that gentle smile.

“It hasn’t lost to the strong winds that blow from the lake. It just keeps blooming here, bravely. Tell me that isn’t deeply moving.”

“Say what?”

Ignoring the man, who sounded irritated, the youth kept talking.

“I wonder if there’s anything I can do for this beautiful flower...”

“Die and fertilize it.”

The man’s gaze was fixed, and he grabbed the young guy’s shoulders roughly. He was about to launch a combo attack, starting with a head-butt and shifting into a knee kick, but— “That’s it!”

—just then, the young man yelled.

The abrupt shout made the aggressor delay his attack for a moment.

But then, when he heard the next words out of the vic's mouth, his hands stopped completely.

"For the sake of this beautiful flower, *first, I'll kill you people.*"

"...?"

The man noticed.

The young guy was grinning, and there was something strange about his mouth...

Like a vampire, *his teeth were sharpened into fangs.*

Then the young man's eyes met his.

The scleras of his eyes were a deep, dark red, and his irises were pure white.

In the center of those inversely colored eyeballs, jet-black pupils looked ready to swallow everything.

Seeing that uncanny face reminded the man of something that had been etched into his memory when he was small.

It might have been an old tale his grandmother had told him, or an innocent rumor that had traveled from child to child.

"You look like a vamp—"

Shink.

It was a simple noise.

In the manner of carving an apple pie, a gleaming silver blade plunged into the man's throat.

"_____"

The man's mouth flapped a few times, but the sharp tip reached his neck vertebrae almost immediately, and after a few seconds, he blacked out completely.

"...?"

“What’s up?”

The men behind the dead thug didn’t register the tragedy that had struck their companion.

In the moonlight, his hands still clutched the weird young guy’s collar. From the rear, that was all it looked like, but the fact that he’d abruptly stopped moving was starting to make everyone suspicious.

Then the youth responded for him in mild, indifferent tones. “Well, you know, it’s not really about what the matter is—”

With his blade still in the throat of the man pressed close to him, the young guy ran his eyes over the people gathered around them.

“...Yes, you’re all truly and beautifully worthless; terribly useless creatures.”

“Wha—?”

At this, the mafiosi gradually began to realize something was wrong.

Fearing the worst about their immobile companion, they began to close in, their faces tense.

“That’s right! And by the way, the people you’re planning to deal with won’t be showing up!”

The words had been sudden.

This young guy, who’d had absolutely no connection to them up until this moment, had abruptly mentioned the deal, their job.

This guy, who had tromped right through the “barrier” the mafiosi had assumed they and the other party had created, now kept on talking, smiling that kind smile...

“You’ve been kicked to the curb in grand style! Not only did your business associates refuse to let you who were about to die come with them—of course they would—they won’t even be offering flowers to your spirits! When you think about that, you’re really, truly ridiculous, too. I actually feel bad for you. Even so, in the presence of this flower’s beauty, it’s all equally—worthless!”

As he wrapped up his speech, the young man put a little more strength into

the hand that gripped the knife.

Bang Bang Bang

The sounds were thoroughly dry and very sharp.

The mafioso's corpse had been pressed close to the youth, hiding him. As the shots rang out, its neck burst, and several bullets flew out of it.

"Gahk!"

"Ungh..."

Red holes opened up in the faces and chests of a few of the closest men, and they began dropping to their knees on the pavement like marionettes with cut strings.

"?!"

"Why you—"

In response to the "death" that had abruptly materialized in front of them, the remaining ten or so men all reached into their jackets.

However, the young guy made no attempt to move. Using the corpse as a shield, he kept dispassionately *squeezing the trigger of the blade* he held.

Several blasts echoed across the nighttime lakeshore, but they all came from the youth's weapon.

He sent bullets into the men who had reached into their jackets for guns, in order. And when about half of the men were down, he pulled his piece out of the neck of the body he'd been using as cover.

The corpse's heart had stopped beating, but a weak fountain still rose from its neck.

Although they didn't pause as they reached for their weapons, the surrounding men saw the shape of the guy's own in the moonlight.

A gun and—a knife?

It did look like a handgun.

What struck the mafiosi as odd was that the barrel seemed abnormally long

for its overall size.

They noticed the abnormality almost immediately. Because the shadow that had looked like a gun barrel was bathed in moonlight and had retaken its innate, sharp gleam.

“A knife...gun?”

As he muttered, one of the mafiosi fired his heater.

Their adversary had let his arm dangle limply, and it looked as if this would finally be the end of the lunatic.

However, a shape that refused to let that happen jumped out in front of him.

In nearly the same moment as the gunshot, a sharp metallic sound rang out—A lean shadow stood in front of the young man.

The figure had crossed its arms in front of its face, and pale sparks flew from them.

On seeing that, for a moment, the mafiosi froze.

“Wha...?”

“Who’s this punk?! Where’d he come from?!”

The figure wore oddly shaped wrist guards on both arms, and they were apparently what had deflected the bullets.

“...Don’t test me.” As the figure spoke, it sent a cold glare back at the man it was protecting. “...This is no time for games, Christopher.”

The words sounded like an accusation, and the young guy shook his head as if wounded.

“How rude. I am always serious, Chi. Besides, I wasn’t testing you just now! I trusted you. You could even say I loved you! Although I’m not interested in men that way, so don’t get your hopes up or feel let down, please.”

The man he’d called Chi shook his head wordlessly, then began to walk toward the remaining crooks. The men hastily started shooting again, but all the bullets they sent Chi’s way turned into sparks and ricocheted.

Chi closed the distance with the speed of a wild animal, using circular arm

movements to shield his whole body.

Since he'd charged in at a low crouch, his entire body fit inside that "circle," and the bullets that went his way were rendered completely powerless.

That's not poss—

The mafioso who was closest to him wasn't even allowed to finish the thought.

The circle formed by Chi's arms turned into a sphere, and at the moment it seemed about to touch his body, Chi widened the sweep of his arms, instantly expanding the range of that sphere.

The things that had looked like steel wrist guards abruptly sprang up, using his wrists as support points, to form four steel blades that shifted to align with his fingers.

The instant the mafioso heard something click into place, the wrist guards morphed into iron claws and skimmed past his face.

Four red lines ran across his face and throat. The wounds were deep enough to be fatal.

Confirming this through the sensation alone, Chi continued his advance.

Without slowing down or looking back at his falling enemies, the shadow ran soundlessly through the midst of the mafiosi.

That alone halved the number of survivors.

"That's not even..."

"You...monster!"

The men who'd been lucky enough not to be on Chi's killing route hastily turned their guns on the racing shadow's back.

However—just before they squeezed the triggers, a voice spoke from behind them.

"Hmm... You boys really are weak, aren't you?"

The smell of blood and powder smoke drifted in the dark warehouse district, and the sound was completely unsuited to the place: It was a woman's sultry

voice.

“?!”

For a moment, the men hesitated, not sure whether they should turn around or go ahead and fire.

A few of them had let their instincts take over and fired, but the bullets didn't even fall within the range of Chi's arms.

Seeing this, the woman behind them gave a musical laugh.

“The Russo Family... Last year—or, no, was it the year before?—several of you were killed by a gang of neighborhood children, weren't you? Hee-hee, hee-hee-hee.”

The chuckle was pointed, but a question welled up inside the men faster than anger did.

Who is this woman—? No, who are all these people?

“Pitiful. And you call yourselves the Russo Family, former rulers of a corner of Chicago? If several dozen of those kids ganged up on you and killed a few mafiosi...then we'll do the opposite: A few of us will force several dozen of you to your knees— Now, isn't that humiliating?”



From the circumstances and the things she was saying, the woman was definitely with the other two monsters.

That made her an enemy.

It was a simple conclusion. If she was an enemy, they could just turn around and fill her full of lead.

But what if she was holding a gun on them?

Like we care.

The men had stopped being able to make calm decisions, and they turned, thrusting their guns out behind them.

If their opponent was holding a weapon at the ready, they'd just nail her right between the eyes. If she was unarmed, they'd use her against the other two, as a hostage.

Relying on these simple calculations alone, one of them turned around swiftly.

As if drawn by that first man, the other "survivors" also looked behind them, one after another— "Huh...?"

Their minds went blank.

No one was there.

In the spot where they were sure the voice had been speaking up until a moment ago, there was nothing but the blank red-brown wall of a warehouse.

Their confusion gradually changed to terror, and they hastily scanned their surroundings.

"...Wha...agh!"

As they tried to speak, a sharp coldness intruded on their brains.

It soon turned into the warmth of blood, but they weren't able to feel it.

"What is it?!"

A man whose attention had been monopolized by Chi yelled, registering the crisis behind him.

When he looked, he saw black “rings” protruding from the heads of his companions.

Part of the rings had made it completely through their skulls, and they were very obviously no longer among the living.

But the voice...

“I’m sorry about this.”

From the shadows of the warehouse, only the woman’s voice echoed, quietly and clearly.

It was as if she were speaking directly into his brain.

“We weren’t actually planning to kill you. It was one of Chris’s whims. I’m sorry.”

“Yeek...”

At that point, the men’s emotional vectors narrowed to focus on terror.

But the moment they attempted to surrender to their instincts and scream—
“I hate noisemakers.”

—Chi ran between the men like the wind, and the only sound that left their throats was the whistle of escaping air.

Only one, a guy who’d escaped a slash to the throat, spat the vengeful words of a sore loser at the killers as his consciousness drained away, along with his blood.

“...Dammit... If Ladd were... If only Ladd were here, you two-bit hoods wouldn’t...”

“I don’t know who your Ladd is, but he’s not here now.”

The throat that spouted resentment was run through by Chi’s indifferent blade.

“Ghk...! ...——”

“That’s all that matters.”

In less than a minute, the suffocating smell of blood had enveloped the area.

In the midst of a scene that would have driven a normal person mad, Chi stood among the corpses, not seeming to feel anything in particular. His steel claws had already returned to their wrist guard configuration, and each of the blades lay on its side, covering his arms.

As before, the woman was nowhere to be seen, and the noise of the wind from the lake blew past them.

“Ah... It really is pretty... This flower...”

Partway through the fight, Christopher, the young guy, hadn’t even watched events play out. He’d just kept gazing at the flower by the roadside in fascination.

“Haah...*hff...hff...*”

There was a man standing behind him.

He was one of the mafiosi who’d been surrounding Christopher a short while ago, but for some reason, he’d escaped Chi’s attacks and the mysterious rings without a scratch.

Another difference between him and the other men was that he hadn’t taken a gun from his jacket, and he hadn’t turned any murderous intent on these pre-deal intruders.

Or at least he hadn’t until just now.

At this point, stark anger suffused his expression, and he spoke to Christopher grimly.

“...What was that?”

“‘Flowers are pretty.’ What else would it be?”

“Don’t screw with me! The job I asked you to do, when the other group got here, was to cause a disturbance *and kill this one guy!*”

As he screamed the words, the man kicked one of the corpses that lay at his feet. It belonged to the first man Christopher had killed.

“And you—you killed all of ’em! You shot the whole thing straight to hell!”

As the man attempted to lay into him with complaints, Christopher turned

around, looking like a little kid.

“Aw, c’mon, you know it was shot to hell before it even started.”

As if responding to his words, Chi spoke from behind the man. “Undercover agent, you successfully infiltrated the Russo Family, but over the past few years, you’ve become a complete drug addict. You went for wool and came home not just shorn, but a maggot.”

“Wha...?!” The man attempted to defend himself, but from the darkness nearby, a woman spoke.

“And so? What is this? The Russos seemed to be going under, and you thought that if nothing changed, word of your flaw would find its way back to your headquarters. Worse, you’d become a criminal. That’s why you came to us, isn’t it? You wanted us to kill the one person who had proof you’d been sent drugs, making it look as if it were due to trouble during the deal, the work of another mafia syndicate. Correct?”

On hearing facts bluntly repeated back to him even though he hadn’t mentioned them when ordering the hit, the man felt a tension different from the earlier kind run through him from head to toe.

“...If you know that much, this’ll go faster. In that case—! Why’d you do that?! If I’m the only one in this situation without a scratch, then...”

“Don’t yell.”

The next thing the man knew, Christopher’s face was right in front of him.

His expression was mild, and his sharp fangs showed.

“You’ll scatter the flower petals.”

As he whispered, he put his index finger to his lips in a graceful motion.

“If you’re going to shout, let’s sing instead! A song of admiration for flowers, a paeon to Nature! When extolling all of creation, there’s no need for lyrics. ‘La-la-la’ is enough. Come on: La la-la-la, la. ♪”

In a clear voice, Christopher sang a song without words.

“La la du-la dou-ra-ra la-la. ♪”

Joining that light voice, Chi also sang along casually, smiling for the first time.

“Lu-lu la lu-lu la-la-la. ♪”

From the shadows of the warehouse, a woman began singing as well, and the stool pigeon found himself surrounded by a gentle ensemble.

Yet, he didn’t have the emotional capacity to accept it.

“Answer my question!”

As the man yelled, blood vessels standing out, the leader of the trio sighed and shook his head.

“I’ve been telling you already, over and over and over again, for the past few minutes.” Speaking like a petulant child, Christopher told his client the plain facts. *“It was because this flower was pretty. That’s all.”*

“...Hunh?”

For a moment, the agent failed to grasp what the other man’s words meant, and he repeated them in his head, again and again.

“That’s... Like it could actually be for a stupid reason like that?! You massacred everybody because a flower was pretty?! You think that’s even believable?!”

“It’s only unbelievable from your personal perspective.”

“Don’t give me that! This isn’t just my perspective! It’s universal common sense!”

As if matching the mood of the stoolie, who was breathing roughly, Christopher gradually grew more and more animated. He started shaking his head faster and faster.

“Nononononono, you’re wrong about absolutely every little thing, starting from way back there.”

At that point, his shaking head stopped dead, and he poked the tip of the agent’s nose as if the man were a pet dog.

“Listen, according to universal common sense, you mustn’t kill people. However, since we’re here, you’re already permitting killing, which means common sense is lacking from the very beginning. That’s important.”

“That’s not an answer! Why do you have to kill because a flower’s pretty—?”

“Even if I explained it, you wouldn’t understand. After all, this is an issue of my own ‘personal perspective.’ I just wanted to see beautiful life, blooming vigorously, in a place filled with corpses. That’s all it was. Okay?”

“Nobody cares about that! You little... You think it’s okay for two-bit hired killers to pull a stunt like that?!” the undercover agent yelled, although his face seemed desperate. “Isn’t that going to turn into a trust issue on your next job? Hunh?!”

He was the client here, but he looked like a rat who’d been run down by a cat. He bared his fangs with all his might, intending to bite the cat, but Christopher shrugged off his shout easily, beaming benevolently. The mismatch between his innocent, childlike smile and the sharp teeth that lined his mouth made him seem even creepier.

“There won’t be any trust issues. After all—”

The next instant, the blade of his knife-gun was against the base of the agent’s throat.

“Wha...?”

“—if the person who knows all the details of the job dies, there’s no way for rumors to spread.”

“Wh... Wh-whuh-wh... Why, you...!”

“Gun-swords are great, aren’t they? After you kill with the knife, you can finish ’em off with a bullet. It’s twice as nice. Although this one’s too small to be either a real sword or a proper gun. Thus, I just call it a knife-gun.”

Describing a method of use clearly different from what the designer had intended, he softly set his finger on the trigger.

There was no hesitation in the movement, and the agent’s terror peaked instantly.

“...!”

The man was no longer able to speak. Christopher’s gaze shifted to the moon in the sky.

“Ah... What a pretty moon... That’s right. In the presence of this beautiful moon and flower, contracts and trust issues and justice and evil and the fact that I massacred everybody... They’re all truly trivial, don’t you think?”

Smiling brightly, Christopher let up on the trigger.

“I’m joking. Did I startle you? Were you scared? If you were scared, you should sing! Go on, set your joy at being alive to a rhythm and sing it! ‘La-la, la-la-la!’ Like that! Sing what you feel, sing what you feel!”

“...”

The agent’s fear had locked his mouth up, and Christopher kept on talking to him.

“Lu-lu, la-la-la. ♪ ...Come on, sing. I’m all lonely over here.”

There was genuine warmth in the young guy’s smile. It only frightened the agent more.

“Lu la-lu lu. ♪ La-la-la?”

Still wearing that smile, he set his finger on the trigger again.

The man’s nerves were already fragile from drug use, and the countdowns to death that were being continuously inflicted on him had nearly shattered them.

“Agh...ah...”

“...”

Just when the blade that was fused with the gun barrel was about to slowly sink into the man’s throat...

“Chris.”

...the woman’s voice echoed from the darkness, and Christopher instantly stopped moving.

“Listen, ‘the twins’—Sham and Hilton—just made contact.”

“Really, Leeza?”

Quietly lowering the gun, Christopher pivoted on his heel.

Are they going to spare me?

“Oh, by the way, I did lie to them back there. Just once.”

As if he'd read the agent's mind, Christopher abruptly stopped in his tracks.

“...?”

“When I said the group they were dealing with wasn't coming. That was a lie.”

“...Huh?”

“What happened here?”

A low, sharp voice spoke behind the undercover agent.

When he hastily turned around, Chi—who had been there a moment ago—was gone. In his place was a group of about a dozen Asian people.

“Did you do this? Answer us.”

They were all being careful to avoid the blood that flowed from the corpses, and the quiet feeling of pressure became a wind that buffeted the agent.

“No, this was...”

He turned to look back again, but no one was there.

Christopher, Chi, and the presence of the woman who'd been in the darkness, the one they'd called Leeza—they'd all vanished like mist.

“Ah...”

Despair.

The drug-addicted mole understood the situation perfectly. The emotion that rose in his mind was completely different from the terror he'd felt a moment ago.

Utter despair.

If he told them exactly what had happened here, would they believe him?

If they did believe him, in order to make them understand why he alone had survived, he'd have to tell them about the hired killers—and that he was the one who'd hired them.

If he did that, he was sure to lose his life.

He'd have to pretend he'd survived by sheer coincidence. He couldn't let them pick up on the relationship between the hitmen and himself.

In other words: The reputation of Christopher's group wouldn't suffer a single scratch. On top of that, they now had ideal blackmail material on him.

He couldn't do a thing. There was nothing for him to do.

The stool pigeon, who had plunged into the despair known as "reality," fell to his knees in the sea of blood, muttering in shock.

"...Monsters..."



"Ahhhhh... That's excellent... Absolutely fantastic! A single flower, blooming at the feet of a man in despair... That's going to be big—I just know it! It'll be a hit right through the next seven generations!"

Christopher shouted from the boat, looking ecstatic.

On a boat floating on Lake Michigan, two men were in high spirits, a pair of binoculars in hand.

More accurately, Christopher was in high spirits.

"Oh, but this is awful. That flower may not bloom until the end of those seven generations. That's not good."

"The man will be gone before that."

Ignoring Chi, who was looking jaded, Christopher opened his red eyes wide and bared his fangs in delight.

"That would be its own kind of good. Isn't there an Asian proverb that says 'All worldly things are transitory'?"

"...Not that I care, Christopher, but if you keep doing things like this, we really will lose trust."

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! It doesn't matter what happens to trust in our *side business*. We just need to maintain constant trust from one person. That's our main business. Isn't that right?"

He sounded unconcerned, and Chi sighed quietly.

“We’ve made a decent name for ourselves as hitmen. We’re not up there with Vino or the Handyman, but we’re fairly well-known in this industry. Control yourself.”

“Fame I don’t care about doesn’t move me. What sort of value could that name and reputation have? ...Hey, did I just say something cool? Write it down.”

“Quit messing around.”

“Either way. If we wanted to become top dog in our side business, we’d have to do something about that Vino fella, right? Tracking him down would be a pain.”

Christopher kept gazing at the lakeshore for a while longer. However, once the boat moved and the flower and the man were hidden in the shadows of the buildings, his expression immediately cooled, and he spoke to his friend.

“Well? What did Sham and company say?”

“Don’t ask me.”

As Chi retorted indifferently, a third voice echoed across the boat, as if it had been waiting for that. “Gladly. After all, it involves what you termed our ‘main business,’ Chris.”

Christopher and Chi turned to look in the direction of the voice, but all they saw was the darkness over the lake.

“Leeza? Huh? We’re on a boat... Where are you talking from?!”

“Creepy.”

On the boat, the two men looked at each other, but Leeza’s voice continued, not seeming particularly bothered. “There’s a message from Huey. He says to take the train to New York tomorrow and help Tim out with his job there.”

“Wow.”

Acting startled in a patently artificial way, Christopher cheerfully opened his mouth wide.

“Well, well! It’s been ages! Us, getting back to our main business—how many

years has it been, or rather, how many decades?”

“Three months.”

Ignoring Chi, who had blandly stated the facts, Christopher showed his fangs, and his eyes sparkled brightly.

“Oh, it’s been donkey’s years since we saw Adele, too. She’s working under ‘*play-it-safe*’ Tim, so she probably hasn’t gotten to rampage at all. I bet she’s frustrated. Poor thing, poor thing.”

Shaking his head in pity, he leaned far back, looking up at the beautiful sphere that illuminated the lake.

“Well, that’s fine. The moon seems to be wishing us well, and there’s not a single cloud over our path! Yes! After all, wherever we go, all that’s ever there are the blessings of the sun—and a rain of blood...”



Several days later New York Pennsylvania Station “What was that about ‘the blessings of the sun,’ hmm? Your rain of blood would get washed away fast.”

In the station entrance, where wind and rain blustered, Chi muttered a taunt. Both his arms were wrapped in cloth.

“Nature is capricious. That’s why I love her.”

Giving a chagrined smile, Christopher set his hand on a bright-red umbrella.

“Let’s sing in the rain. A tune that sings optimistically of our soaking-wet selves. If possible, the sort of song that would let us keep our umbrellas shut and smile as the rain drenches us... And so, Chi: Think up some splendid lyrics.”

“I refuse.”

The driving rain slipped under their umbrellas and began to get the pair wet.

In the midst of a torrential rainstorm that seemed to slash everything apart, they had most definitely arrived in this town.

Arrived, in order to color the rain that poured down into the streets a dark, hot red...



At the same time Near Grand Central Station An abandoned building As he listened to the sound of the rain growing louder, Tick murmured quietly: “It doesn’t look like it’s going to stop, does it?”

“...No.”

From the corner of a room heaped with rubble and dust, Maria responded softly.

There wasn’t a trace of the usual, glorious animation in her voice, and a pathetic atmosphere hung around her.

A single fight had dashed her to the very bottom of her “conviction.”

The blades of her Japanese swords would cut anything. That had been all she had believed in; her very life itself.

More accurately, *the act of believing this* had been the reason for existing that she’d set for herself.

She’d had complete faith in the sharpness of her swords. She’d believed that the Japanese sword was the very best blade there was and had worked to prove it with her own hands. That had been Maria Barcelito’s life.

However, just a few hours ago, a large crack had opened in that conviction.

The words of the woman with the spear rose vividly in Maria’s mind.

“But...um, believing is, erm... You’re just deluding yourself, you know.”

No.

“As proof: You’re already beginning to doubt.”

No!

She repeated her denial over and over, but the vision that had risen in her heart didn’t dissolve, and the spear in the hostile woman’s hands rushed at her neck— *“You believe that, with those blades, you’ll never defeat this spear.”*

The phantom spearhead plunged right through her throat.

“AAaaaaaaaaaaaaAAAAaaaaaaah!”

“?! Maria?! ”

Maria had been curled up, hugging her knees, but abruptly, she'd clutched at her head and begun to scream.

When Tick saw her, the smile he usually wore disappeared.

"What's wrong, Maria? Does something hurt?"

Running over to the girl, who was trembling hard, the torture expert peeked into her face, looking worried.

"Aaaah... AAAaaaaAAaaaah... Ah..."

At that point, finally seeming to come to her senses, Maria looked back at Tick with eyes like a frightened dog's. Breathing deeply, shoulders heaving, she gradually calmed her thoughts.

"Ah... AaAah... I'm sorry, amigo."

"Are you really okay?"

Tick was watching her with an expression like a child's, and Maria gave him a smile filled with false cheer.

"It's fine, amigo! I was just having a nasty dream, that's all..."

"You didn't lose."

"Huh...?"

At those abrupt words, Maria's eyes went round, but Tick didn't pay any attention to that. He went on, speaking as if he knew exactly what kind of vision she'd been seeing.

"I've been thinking this whole time, and, Maria, yooou didn't lose to that woman."

"...Ah-ha-ha. You don't need to try to make me feel better."

"Uh-uh, what I mean is, in the end, Ronny broke in and spoiled the match, riiight? Thaaat means you haven't actually settled it."

At this ingenious remark, Maria was forced to recall the end of the recent battle.

Ronny.

She didn't know that name, but she knew immediately whom Tick was talking about.

Right as things were about to be settled, that mysterious man had abruptly broken into their time—and had instantaneously confiscated both their weapons.

She definitely wanted to know how he'd taken their weapons away when they were in the middle of a fight to the death, but at this point, to Maria, that was only a trivial issue.

"No... That's no good, Tick. I'd already lost by then. I don't mean my strength was gone. Even if it was just a little bit, I doubted Murasámia. I lost..."

"Buuut..."

Tick was trying to say something else, and Maria yelled at him in irritation.

"I lost! I did! ...You can't know how I feel right now, Tick!"

The only ones who could decide the outcome of a match were the people who'd fought it. Precisely because she felt this was true, when Tick talked about the results of the match in an attempt to console her, it felt weird to her.

The various emotions that churned inside her rushed toward that sense of wrongness.

As if her dejection up until then had been a lie, she slammed her exploding emotions into the person in front of her.

"What do you know? You weren't in that match; don't you talk about wins or losses! You've never even fought! You only ever cut up people who don't fight back! You never put your life on the line, Tick, so there's no way you could know how I feel!"

"..."

"All you do is smile, all the time! You can't...understand..."

After she'd screamed until she was out of breath, Maria felt terrible about it.

Could she be a more pitiful loser right now? She'd taken the anger and sadness that should have been turned on herself, and she slammed them

against—of all people—the man who was trying to help her.

Tick had been constantly trying to cheer her up, ever since they'd entered this abandoned building. Some of her current irritation was indignation at herself, for not being able to respond to his encouragement.

Yet she'd taken that indignation and lashed out at him with it.

"Oh..."

She knew she had to apologize to him. For a moment, though, she wasn't sure what to say, and she hesitated.

Slipping into that slight gap, Tick opened his mouth and spoke simply, in the voice of a child who'd broken his best friend's toy.

"I'm sorry."

"Huh?!"

"I'm dumb, and I bet that's why I don't understand your feelings, Maria."

No.

Hastily, Maria tried to deny that, but Tick's words were firmer than she'd expected them to be, and confused as she was, they didn't give her time to interrupt.

"Like I said earlier, I don't understand the 'belief' you keep talking about. I can't see it. That means I can't believe in it. If I were smarter, I know I'd understand what you're feeling, and I wouldn't make you sad, but I..."

"..."

"—I'm sorry. I really don't understand your feeling that you lost."

Every time Tick apologized, Maria's heart squeezed tighter.

It felt as if his apologies were exposing her weaknesses, one after another.

She couldn't stop him, though. At this point, she didn't think she was qualified to. Right now, failure as she was, she thought all she could do was stab herself with Tick's words.

But Tick's next words were clearly different from the conversation's earlier

trend.

“So—*win*.”

“...Huh?”

“If you won for sure next time, that would be great.”

Maria couldn't understand what Tick was saying. She just waited, dazedly, for him to continue.

“I'll work hard to understand how you feel when you lose. But I'm dumb, sooo...I think it's probably going to take an awfully long time.”

“ ...”

“Listen, though, I'll know how you feel when you win. I'm sure I will.”

Tick's decisive promise could have sounded like a careless statement.

“Because, I mean, when you win a fight, you allways smile. I know what sort of times people smiile at. I bet it's the same. So, if you win next time, I'm sure I'll know how you feel. Besides...while you're being my bodyguard, wins and losses don't really count. See?”

Closing the blades of his scissors with a *snick*, Tick once more said something unsettling with an innocent smile.

“Because, Maria, you're not a bodyguard—you're a hired killer.”



The Hudson River Near the riverside construction site An abandoned factory, filled with the scent of rusting iron.

This vast space, which had probably been used to manufacture components of some sort, was littered with big rusted-out machines, lots of pipes through which nothing flowed anymore, and electric bulbs that gave off a sorry excuse for light.

“So...what do we do now?”

In a room saturated with the smell of ruin, a small voice echoed.

The young guy who'd spoken had a tattoo that covered half his face and eyes that seemed to be on the verge of tears.

A crowd of young people stood around him. Even at a low estimate, there seemed to be more than twenty of them.

They were a band of kids who hung out in New York. Their group had no name in particular; they were just a bunch of punks who'd hit it off with one another and formed a community.

As he spoke, the tattooed youth who stood at the center of the group wore an incredibly pathetic expression.

"There's really nothing to do... What do we do, Nice?"

"Hmm... For the moment, there shouldn't be anyone left at the Genoard house..."

When Nice, a girl with glasses and an eye patch, spoke, Jacuzzi Splot, the tattooed guy, heaved a great big sigh.

"How did things end up like this...?"

As he murmured, he was remembering what had happened that afternoon.

Uneventful days.

Today had been a perfectly normal, peaceful day, just like the others—right up until the first visitors had arrived.

When Isaac and Miria had dropped by for the first time in a long while, "the extraordinary" had clearly begun to close in on them.

Shortly after Isaac and Miria, a peculiar group had come to call.

With the question "Do you want to become immortal?" they'd abruptly killed one of their companions right in front of Jacuzzi.

At that point, Jacuzzi had passed out for a bit, but then his friend Chané had suddenly attacked the group, which had introduced itself as "Larva." On top of that, a girl with Japanese swords and a guy with scissors, both of whom seemed to be members of the Gandor Family, had appeared.

Even that hadn't been all. As if striking an additional blow, a man who was apparently a Martillo Family executive had arrived, and the confusion in the mansion's entryway had peaked.

To Jacuzzi's group, the Martillo and Gandor syndicates were nothing but bad news.

Jacuzzi and his friends had been doing a variety of business on their turf without permission. Even if they called it "business," all the things they'd done had been trivial, and since nothing had happened for the past two years or so, most of Jacuzzi's group had just assumed, naturally, that that situation would continue.

But that had been naïve.

A situation that only the worrywart Jacuzzi had been afraid of had become reality and landed squarely on their heads. What sort of negotiations would the mafiosi try to conduct with a group of small-time city punks? Jacuzzi's group hadn't been able to imagine quite that much, but no matter what the content proved to be, it was clear these talks would be life-or-death.

"...Anyway, we can't just run around forever. We'll only make them mad... I'd like to steer the discussion away from bloodshed as much as possible."

As Jacuzzi briefly summarized the situation, his expression was tense. Despite that, upon hearing his explanation, one of his friends spoke up confidently.

"No need to worry about that, Jacuzzi!"

"?"

"There won't be any bloodshed on our side, at least!"

"What do you mean, Nick?"

At Jacuzzi's uneasy question, his friend gave a self-important chuckle, then filled him in on a certain fact.

"Because Vino's on his way over."

Buzzzzzz.

At that casual statement, the air in the abandoned building roiled.

"...You called Felix?"

"Yeah, Jack's gone to get him now."

Jacuzzi visualized the face of the man he'd called Felix. The thugs around him

looked at each other, wearing odd expressions.

Their eyes held a complex mixture of clear relief and bewilderment. Before long, all those gazes came to rest on one of their friends.

She was a girl with black hair and even features, in a black dress. Chané Laforet.

At the name “Vino,” the girl’s eyes had widened slightly, but after that, she just continued to stand in a corner of the factory, her face blank.

However, if you looked closely, you could tell that her lack of expression was a bit softer than usual, and Nice spoke up, teasing her.

“Does that make you happy? Knowing your fiancé is coming to save you.”

In response, Chané only averted her eyes slightly—but everyone around her saw her pale skin flush faintly.

Felix Walken. His other name was Claire Stanfield (although the only one allowed to call him Claire was Chané).

About a year ago, after they’d established their base in New York, he’d turned up out of nowhere and had played a big part in resolving some trouble that had centered on Chané.

He was apparently famous, a guy who’d been dubbed “the Handyman” and “Vino” by underground society, and he was also a shameless individual who’d appeared out of the blue and introduced himself as Chané’s fiancé.

Various things had kept Chané on her toes during that incident, but by now, she seemed to have accepted the engagement.

However—

“Is that going to be okay? If he gets involved, things are bound to get really complicated...”

Jacuzzi murmured uneasily, making no attempt to hide his feelings.

Apparently, the guy had a few kinks in his personality, and the others present nodded, agreeing with Jacuzzi.

“Yeah, but there ain’t nothing we can do about that Ronny fella on our own.”

“B-but...”

Jacuzzi still sounded worried, but just then one of his friends who’d been patrolling outside ran into the factory, cutting him off.

“Hey! Those guys... One of the guys from earlier is here! By himself!”

“?!”

At the man’s yell, a sudden tension swirled inside the factory.

Up until then, Jacuzzi had looked like he was about to cry, but he pulled his expression together and prompted his friend to report the details.

““Those guys from earlier’... Which group, and what sort of person?”

At that, the kid who’d been patrolling faltered for a second. Then, desperately organizing the situation in his head as he went, he gave only the facts he could remember.

“Um... You know: that one guy! The weird group who showed up first—the guy who got *skewered by that spear* and then kept getting killed by the doll with the samurai swords!”



Dallas Genoard had been consumed.

Dominated by a single emotion that welled up inside him.

Murderous intent.

A pure, murky blackness made up of anger, desire, resentment, and hostility boiled down until it scorched and stuck to the inside of his heart.

The fierce rain pelted him, soaking him from head to toe, but his feelings didn’t cool.

He wasn’t focused on killing just one person. He had many different kinds, for a wide range of people.

That didn’t matter at this point, though.

The varied murderous aims melted together inside him, and if he happened to find a target, Dallas would probably hit them with all that intent to kill, including his pent-up resentment toward others.

Still, if he was actually going to do that, he was lacking something—and he knew better than anyone what it was.

Power. I want power.

Just enough to kill people. That's enough for me.

Why aren't I strong enough to kill the guys who make me sick? How can I not have the power to kill guys I have to kill? That's weird no matter how you think about it.

Inwardly spitting out these incredibly self-centered thoughts, Dallas walked through the pouring rain without an umbrella.

It wasn't that he didn't have the guts to kill somebody.

Assuming you could call being able to kill a person with no hesitation "courage," he was definitely mentally prepared for it.

It was simply that all the people he wanted to kill had power that made them too much for him to handle.

Dallas had just one power: a superhuman "incomplete immortality."

However, most of the guys he was trying to kill had "complete immortality," and his remaining enemies all possessed strength that far surpassed his own.

"If it was that goofy-looking couple, then maybe..."

Dallas didn't know Isaac and Miria were immortals, and while that thought had crossed his mind, it didn't take him long to mentally strike it out.

"I don't care about those losers now. That Tim bastard... I've got to slaughter all those Larva maggots... Right now, right this minute!"

He gritted his teeth, and the next thing he knew, he was standing in the riverside construction site.

The river he'd spent several years drowning in. A riverbed that held nothing but memories of pain.

Dallas had intentionally returned to a place like that because he'd had an idea.

When they'd dropped him in, he was pretty sure his buddies had been with

him.

At this point, he didn't even remember their names, but he'd had two more pals who were incomplete immortals, like him.

He didn't remember the circumstances that had led to his being dredged up, but he'd thought there might be some sort of hint here. That was what had brought him back.

Internally, he'd used the word *pals*, but there hadn't been anything like friendship in the term. It was just that, since they had undying bodies like his, he was hoping he'd be able to use them as "disposable pawns that would last forever."

In the end, though, all he found was a construction site where the work had been left half-finished and no clues about where to find pawns.

"Dammit... A trip for biscuits, huh?"

Cursing in the downpour, he glared at the Hudson River, which had started to grow choppy.

The watery jail he'd been buried in up until a few short days ago.

In the midst of time that seemed like eternity, during which the only thing he'd been allowed to do was drown perpetually—it was probably fortunate that Dallas had blacked out almost immediately.

If he'd stayed conscious through all that pain, by now, he probably wouldn't have had much of a mind left. On that thought, he spat at the heaving surface of the water in loathing.

Thinking that he had no more business here, Dallas turned on his heel with no hesitation—and stopped dead.

Several kids were standing there, under shabby umbrellas, surrounding him in a half circle.

The sound of the pouring rain had hidden the group's presence, and Dallas had completely failed to notice their approach.

"What are you losers...?"

There was an overwhelming difference in numbers, but Dallas wasn't the least bit daunted. If experiencing the agony of dying had changed one thing about him, it had been that his sense of fear had very nearly evaporated.

"You got business with me or something? If not, get lost, or actually, get lost even if you do... I'll massacre you."

"U-um..."

In contrast to Dallas, who seemed completely at ease, the guy who was acting as the group's leader lost his nerve.

In a voice that nearly disappeared into the sound of the rain, Jacuzzi spoke timidly.

"Excuse me, mister. Are you a friend of...of the Larva group?"

Dallas looked at the tattooed young guy, who'd asked his question as if he wasn't very confident about it, and then remembered who he was looking upon: *These are the guys Tim said he was gonna use as throwaway pawns...*

They were the thugs who'd moved into the house on Millionaires' Row, the one Dallas's family, the Genoards, used as their second residence.

Come to think of it, why were these pills at my summerhouse? That Tim bastard didn't tell me anything about that... Well, my old man or my brother probably loaned it to them for one of their underworld jobs.

Dallas knew that his father and older brother refined drugs. He'd been excluded from the rights and benefits of that business simply because he was young, and his misguided resentment over that was why he'd left home.

Unaware his father and brother had been rubbed out by the Runorata Family, Dallas privately determined that Jacuzzi's group must have something to do with the drugs.

Once he'd figured out the identity of the others, he responded promptly.

"Umbrella."

"Huh?"

"I said gimme a damn umbrella. I'll kill you."

“Eep...! S-s-s...sorry, I’m sorry.”

At Dallas’s words, Jacuzzi’s face crumpled, and he involuntarily handed him his own umbrella.

“Jacuzzi!”

Nice and the others sounded reproachful, but Jacuzzi winked lightly and raised both hands, quelling the people around him with a gesture: *It’s fine, it’s fine.*

Several of them glared at Dallas, but he wasn’t the least bit bothered by it. He walked over to stand beside Jacuzzi and spoke to him arrogantly.

“What’s the matter? You’ve got questions for me, right? Well, get the lead out and take me to your hideout, or wherever you want... Rocks-for-brains.”

“...Huh? Oh, uh, right!”

Looking at the tattooed fellow, who was nodding and getting soaked by the rain, Dallas remembered what Tim had said that afternoon.

“Long story short... They’re our sacrificial pawns.”

Sacrificial pawns.

“That’s got a nice ring to it.”

“Huh?”

Ignoring the perplexed youth, Dallas turned aside and snickered.

An idea involving Jacuzzi’s group had already surfaced in his mind.

If I manage to get these guys on board...I might be able to kill those Larva goons.

A concrete way to convert his murderous intent into reality.

Dallas had already decided to rope them in and make them his friends.

“This could turn into a long relationship.”

The word *friend* was, to Dallas, a synonym for *tool*.

Keeping the arrogance in his attitude, he welcomed his “friends” curtly.

“Well, I’m looking forward to it.”

Then, looking up as if he’d thought of something, he stuck the hand with the umbrella out toward Jacuzzi.

“...You’re getting wet. Get under here.”

“Huh? Oh, s-sure.”

“Better be grateful. That’s two favors you people owe me for now... Actually, since I’m gonna tell you all sorts of stuff in a minute or so, I guess you owe me three.”

Jacuzzi got under the umbrella as he’d been told, but he still looked bewildered. He didn’t know what kind of person this guy was.

The one thing he did know was that—

—the man next to him under this umbrella was most likely not human, but an immortal monster.

Even so, he asked just one question that had been bothering him.

“U-um... By favors, you mean...the umbrella and...telling us things and... What’s the last one?”

“Hunh? That one’s obvious.”

Jacuzzi had question marks all over his face, so Dallas muttered, self-centered and matter-of-fact: “You people are freeloading in *my* second residence.”

“...Huh?”

Ignoring Jacuzzi, whose question marks had multiplied, Dallas set off confidently across the rough ground by the river.

Inwardly, he was as gleeful as a little kid about having acquired tools to satisfy his intent to kill.

The rain grew even fiercer—and the sky was still dark and gloomy.



Fifth Avenue Empire State Building

When New York City's large, prosperous Waldorf Hotel relocated, the Empire State Building was built on the land it vacated.

In sharp contrast to its elegant art deco exterior, its interior was very simple and filled with office tenants.

It had been completed in 1931, and at the time, it was the tallest building in the world. Behind the scenes, the owners having taken various steps to ensure it was "the world's tallest"—during construction, it had vied with the Chrysler Building for the title and had added a tower to its top in order to surpass it, calling it a "dirigible mooring mast"—it was also a structure with a slightly checkered history.

Upon entering, you were met by a bank of several dozen elevators. They made the structure seem like a lofty fortress of offices that stretched up and up and up.

In an office partway up the building, a couple who seemed, at first glance, to have nothing to do with business were looking out the window and chatting cheerfully.

"Wow! Look, Miria! The people are like ants!"

"Yes, I bet we could step on them and squish them now!"

Gazing at the black shapes walking around under umbrellas, they said childlike things with innocent faces.

"No, Miria, wait. They say ants can crumble castles with their minds."

"Eeeeeek! Heeeeelp!"

From behind the couple, whose conversation was just as far removed from business as their demeanor was, a voice spoke, sighing.

"You've warped it so far it's impossible to tell what the original proverb was."

The individual who'd spoken was a sharp-eyed man in a suit, and the atmosphere he exuded was a complete mismatch with the couple, who were dressed as if they were going to a party.

Behind him, a woman in a black suit—Ennis—was gazing at him, looking mystified.

When she was sure the sharp-eyed man was finished speaking, Ennis timidly voiced her own question.

“Um...Ronny? What in the world is this place...?”

As she murmured, she looked around. Several men were bustling around the spacious room, moving various goods and opening packages or packing them up.

“They deal in jewels, watches, and works of art—put briefly, it’s an import agency that specializes in small articles.”

“No, that’s not what I meant...”

“I’m the director, and the *caposocietà* is the owner. That said, I’m only lending them my name; in practical terms, I do almost nothing.”

Ronny spoke indifferently, and all Ennis could do was look puzzled.

“It just means we need to use this sort of thing as a front as well. I don’t particularly intend to brag about it, but...it’s a decent place to get out of the rain, isn’t it?”

He shrugged lightly. Seeing this, Ennis exhaled in relief.

Just thirty minutes ago, in a certain residence on Millionaires’ Row, she’d seen him exude a “pressure” that was clearly out of the ordinary.

His overwhelming presence had made it seem as if simply touching him would be enough to break you. The look in his eyes made it take all the courage in your body to even think about defying him.

The man who’d radiated such fearsome pressure had now returned to being a Camorra executive whose seriousness and kindness didn’t suit those sharp eyes.

I wonder who this man really is.

The past half day had left Ennis’s heart littered with questions.

Isaac and Miria had fought with Firo and dashed out. In order to bring them

back, she'd left the restaurant with Ronny, who'd been headed out on different business, but...

How had he known where Isaac and Miria were so easily?

Why had that confusion broken out at the mansion?

How had Ronny taken the weapons from the two women who'd been slashing at each other?

And...

...why had the woman with the spear known her?

The spear user had cut Isaac. When Ennis had seen it, anger had spiked, and she'd stopped the other woman's arm without thinking—but then Isaac and Miria had called Ennis's name, and the woman with the spear had heard them. She'd murmured: *"Um, could you possibly be...Szilard Quates's—?"*

Szilard Quates.

It was the name of Ennis's creator and the name she detested most.

In New York—no, even in the whole world—the number of people who knew of her ties to Szilard had to be very limited.

With that thought in mind, she recalled the mysterious group that had been in the walk-up. The group's demeanor had clearly set them apart from the band of thugs who apparently lived at the mansion (although they didn't seem suited to such a fine residence). In the first place, the mere act of brandishing a spear like that one in the entrance hall had marked them as abnormal.

She could remember the spear woman's face clearly, but she just couldn't seem to recall running into her in the past.

If, hypothetically, the woman had gone on to say "Szilard Quates's secretary," she could have thought of her as someone who'd been involved with an organization that Szilard had once created.

But if the rest of the phrase had been "Szilard Quates's creation, the homunculus"—that would mean she was far more familiar with the relationship between her and Szilard.

In addition, the woman with the spear had reacted to the name “Ennis” itself, not to her face. That meant she hadn’t known what Ennis looked like.

If I see her again...I’ll ask her.

She’d met the spear user’s group completely by chance, and her current goal had nothing to do with them. It did bother her, but in the end, Ennis decided to just keep it in mind, at the level of “if we meet.”

Then she turned her gaze to the pair who were her actual goal.

“Oh, that’s right. Ronny, did you leave that letter for us?”

“You mustn’t eat it without reading it, you know?”

Isaac and Miria had been there for the chaos, too, but she couldn’t see any doubt or bewilderment in their eyes as they spoke.

Ronny responded with a wry smile. “Yes. I left your ‘threatening letter’ on the shop counter, just as you said.”

“You did, huh?! Say, thanks! We swore an oath to ourselves, see.”

“Yes: Until Firo apologizes, we’re not setting foot in that place!”

As she watched the three—who were talking about something weird—out of the corner of her eye, Ennis was puzzled; she didn’t know what was going on. She’d been standing transfixed in the smoke-filled room when Isaac and Miria had grabbed her hands and taken her outside, and the next thing she knew, on Ronny’s suggestion, they’d come to this office.

In the interval, Isaac and Miria had said only one thing to her:

“Sorry, Ennis, but *let us steal you for a bit!*”

“Yes, we’re sorry! We apologize!”

Far too easily, without knowing what was happening—she’d been kidnapped by Isaac and Miria.

“Heh-heh-heh! That Firo! I bet he’s having a tough time right now.”

“Yes, now that he’s lost his special people, he’ll be at his wit’s end!”

Seeing that the pair were wearing, unusually for them, diabolical smiles, Ennis

asked in confusion, "Um... What do you mean, 'Firo's special people'?"

She'd meant it seriously, yet as they answered her, the kidnappers danced by the window, twirling around and around. Outside the glass, the rain reflected the light, and it looked as if the pair were dancing on the silver screen.

"You and Ronny, obviously."

"Yes, his sweetheart and his great teacher!"

The answer had been far too direct. Ronny gave a smirk, and Ennis stared at the couple with round eyes.

"His teacher, hmm? I think old Yaguruma fits the bill better than I do."

"His sweetheart...?"

For a moment, Ennis didn't understand what the word meant. She blinked a few times, then spoke simply.

"That can't be right. I'm just a freeloader, and..."

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! You're dense, Ennis."

"That means you're Firo's unrequited crush, then!"

The two stopped dancing to laugh, and Ennis tilted her head, still bewildered.

"Being called 'dense' by those two is really something... Well, never mind."

Ronny shook his head, looking rather entertained, then left for the recesses of the office to see how the work was going.

Ennis quietly mulled over what the pair had said, turning her awareness on herself for the first time.

"Firo and I...sweethearts?"

She'd never even considered it.

She was alive because Firo was sharing his life with her. If he decided to kill her, he could do it just by thinking.

That was their current relationship, or it should have been.

However, she couldn't think of a word that accurately described that relationship.

They weren't "master and servant," and although they were sharing the same life, they weren't siblings or parent-and-child, either.

Now that she thought about it, she realized the people around them probably did assume they were lovers, since they were living together.

Ennis tried to think of it that way, but she couldn't convince herself completely.

Just a few years had passed since she'd been created as a homunculus that was related to Szilard by blood, and because Szilard had given her only the minimum necessary knowledge, she was incredibly unfamiliar with the emotion known as "love."

She understood the feeling of liking someone and regarding them as special. Yet, at this point, she wasn't truly able to understand the difference between what she felt for Firo and what she felt for Isaac and Miria.

In any case, even if they seemed to be sweethearts as far as other people were concerned—how did Firo actually feel about her?

And how do I feel about Firo?

If Firo liked her, but she wasn't able to think of him as a lover, she would have betrayed him terribly, wouldn't she?

She couldn't understand what the emotions she was feeling actually were, and Isaac's and Miria's words only tossed her around.

I wonder what Firo's doing now.

I wonder how he'd react if he knew someone had kidnapped me.

Inwardly, she was thinking of Firo.

Wondering where the boy who was the source of her life was now, and what he was thinking...



Dammit, dammit, dammit.

So this, *this is what it's like to be helpless, huh?!*

I can't do a thing. There isn't one blasted thing I can do, dammit to hell.

What knowledge?! That cruddy old fart.

It doesn't matter how much of this junk I have; I can't do anything—nothing, not one thing.

I just talked about this with Maiza! About how there's no point if you can't get over the past and your memories under your own steam!

Look at me now, though: Forget the past—I can't even get over this moment. I'm totally hopeless.

No, that doesn't matter.

Whether I'm hopeless or not, it's got nothing to do with this.

Ennis— Is Ennis okay?

That's the only subject I want on the table right now.

If she's safe— If she's safe, I don't care if those past memories crush me.

Even I was startled.

To think I'd invested this much emotion—no, this much of my life—in that Ennis doll.

Did I just get really attached to her, since I've lived with her for so long?

No, no.

Absolutely no way.

It's not that.

It's nothing like that.

I fell for her at first sight. I took a spectacular critical hit, the sort I couldn't even begin to make excuses for, from her gestures and face and words and heart.

That's enough all by itself. I don't have a reason for liking Ennis.

And so, and so, dammit. Tell me what's going on here.

Why did that...that Dallas bastard—?

I can't believe he kidnapped Ennis and Ronny all by himself!

Does this have something to do with that thing Ronny mentioned, the attack on the construction site?

Or was it the punks with Chicago accents that he went to see for that job?

I don't know! Dammit, I didn't think not knowing stuff could make you this helpless.

Is running it? Is running all I can do?

No, there's gotta be a way.

I can't stop, though.

My cells are telling me not to stop. My brain's almost given up hope, so they're doing the thinking instead, telling me to look for Ennis, and so, and so, I can't stop— No... It looks like I've hit my limit.

Even if I've got an immortal body, I've been running as fast as I can, and the speed of my muscle fatigue beat the power of immortality and my own natural repair.

My legs started to shake like an engine that's run out of gas...

The strength went out of me as though someone had cut my strings, and I lost my balance and dropped in my tracks.

The water streaming over the road got me muddy from head to toe, but the heavy rain promptly started washing the mud away.

"Dammit..."

What do I do?

What am I supposed to do, damn you?!

As I looked up, planning on venting my unbearable anger by screaming at the rain...

...I realized the raindrops weren't hitting my face.

I saw a black shadow above my head. Apparently, somebody was holding an umbrella over me.

Who in the heck?

I looked at the owner of the arm that held that umbrella, and what I saw was



Grand Central Station East side

An enormous building stood beside the station. Nicknamed “Mist Wall,” it was the New York branch of the huge Nebula conglomerate.

As its name indicated, the building was a nearly transparent white, like faint mist. Its art deco design gave those who saw it the illusion that a cloud had descended from the sky to the ground.

There were terraces near the very top that formed a pyramid shape, making it look like some sort of monument.

As you’d expect, its height fell far short of the Empire State Building, which stood a little ways away. That said, people’s opinions of it certainly weren’t low, and its dignified, quietly towering presence charmed the hearts of the locals.

Unlike the Empire State Building, this structure wasn’t a collective that had a variety of companies as tenants. It was entirely monopolized, from the ground floor all the way to the top, by the offices and stores of the Nebula Corporation.

In front of this building, which seemed to reach into the heavens as if symbolizing Nebula’s corporate power, a group of about ten men and women stood quietly.

The young man at the center of the group held his umbrella tipped back slightly, not caring about the water that soaked into him because of it.

Even as he looked up at the tower of mist that stretched into the sky, his heart was completely focused on his own past.

The guy was remembering a rat.

A pure-white rat, which he’d had when he was a kid.

The very first small animal he’d ever had.

The boy had been lonely, and that rat had been his only friend.

He’d had no human friends at all. But it wasn’t because other people had disliked him.

He just hadn’t accepted them.

At the time, the boy had been a little brighter than the people around him.

The others had struck him as endlessly ignorant and thickheaded, and even talking to them hadn't seemed worth it.

It wasn't just friends. It was his father, too, and his older brother, and even his departed mother.

In a way, the boy might have been dumb.

In looking down on others, in the end, he'd forced solitude on himself.

Even so, after he'd driven himself into isolation, he'd started to envy his brother's cheerfulness.

Even though he himself was lonely, his dumb brother smiled as if he was enjoying life to the fullest.

This didn't seem fair to the boy, and he withdrew further and further into his shell.

Those gloomy thoughts of his had been alleviated by a white rat, which he'd adopted on a whim.

When he talked to that little animal, it only responded with faint cries, but he began telling it his own thoughts and complaints, things he couldn't tell anybody else.

Like the man who'd spoken the secret of the king's ears into a hole, the boy shared his secrets with the rat, knowing all the time that it wouldn't respond.

I know: I'll use this rat to protect myself. I'll build my world inside it—inside Jimmy.

The boy, who wasn't yet fifteen, had thought this quite calmly.

The rat wasn't a pet. It was no more than a tool to calm his own spirit, to create a place he could return to and find peace. He'd been very clear on that point.

At least, he'd thought that was the case.

However... One day, the boy's thoughts and the "world" he'd stored up inside the rat had crumbled away in the blink of an eye.

When he'd returned to his room, he'd seen the rat with a pair of scissors

several times bigger than the animal itself sticking out of its back.

The innocent, cruel, vivid sight of his brother stabbing those scissors into the rat's back.

He killed him. He got killed. Jimmy did. My brother did it.

What startled the boy was the fact that the emotion that welled up inside him was sadness. The feeling of loss, the sense that he'd lost someone precious, was far stronger than his anger at having a convenient tool broken.

His sorrow at the murder of his special friend was promptly transformed into pain and violent feelings.

The boy screamed.

Give back Jimmy. Just that one thing, over and over again.

However, the boy never once yelled, "Why did you kill him?"

Why had his brother killed Jimmy?

In the moment, the thought hadn't crossed his mind, and as time passed, he began to feel as if it didn't even matter.

Whatever the reason was, it wouldn't change the fact that his brother had stuck a blade into his best friend's back.

After the boy had screamed himself hoarse, he realized something.

His brother hadn't said a single word in protest or apology.

He also realized that, for the first time, the other boy had looked sad in front of him, his own little brother.

I've never been able to understand what my brother was thinking, but—at the very least, he probably didn't care about me.

In the end, he and his brother had parted without ever speaking again, and he'd kept growing.

The man who'd aided that growth, who'd helped him to erase his past and acquire a new self, was Huey Laforet, his current master.

The man who'd *come to pick the boy up* when he'd run away from home had

known everything there was to know about his heart.

It was probably safe to say Huey had a perfect understanding of this boy's ideas, his past, and even what he was thinking now.

The world that the boy had assumed to be sealed inside the rat had appeared before him with the capacity for speech.

The incarnation of the white rat, which had presented itself so abruptly, had expanded beyond the little world the boy had breathed into his pet. Expanded many, many times over and been tossed back to him.

Everything about that man, Huey Laforet, was shrouded in mystery.

The boy had been frightened of him, and at the same time, he'd also been drawn to his vaguely mystical charm.

He'd caught the "world" Huey had thrown back to him, and he had decided to dye his current world that same color.

Over the course of many years, the boy had changed everything about himself.

His name, his hair, his clothes, his voice, his build, his thoughts, his personality: Except for his memories, he'd discarded every sort of "self" he had—in other words, his life as Tock Jefferson—and had gained his present life as "Tim."

However, the one thing he hadn't thrown away, his memories, stood in his path as his largest obstacle.

...Because he'd run into Tick Jefferson, the older brother he'd thought he'd never see again.

Why now, at a time like this...? At such an important time?!

Not only that, but they hadn't merely run into each other by accident in town—they'd met in the presence of the group led by Jacuzzi Splot, whom he'd contacted for this job.

On top of that, apparently his brother was on hostile terms with Jacuzzi's organization.

Still, I guess it's not enough to be concerned about. As long as I ignore it, nothing's going to change. We've just picked up one more obstacle, that's all. My past won't get in the way of the job. There's nothing to worry about. Nothing...

The young guy silently repeated the words in his head, gradually calming his heart.

In the moment he'd come face-to-face with his brother, Tick, he remembered being clearly unsettled. However, just as Tick hadn't seemed to recognize him at all, Tim had acted as if they were complete strangers and had stayed in character as "Tim."

Well, I shaved my head on purpose, and I'm wearing glasses, so it's understandable, but— Man, that's ironic. I wanted to forget so badly, but I knew my brother the moment I saw his face...and apparently, he didn't recognize me at all.

"...m."

In the end, from brothers come strangers. I'm sure of it now. At this point, that faint hope I still had when I left home is completely—

"Tim!"

Finally registering the voice that was speaking behind him, the man—Tim—quietly turned around.

"What is it?"

He kept the muscles of his face under tight control, so that no one would pick up on the emotional conflict he'd been going through up until just now. The result was a quiet expression that wasn't easy to read.

"Sorry. The rain is loud; I didn't hear you."

True, rain was pouring down around them, and the umbrellas they stood under became speakers that transmitted ferocious static to them, but the subordinate who'd hailed him had apparently done so pretty loudly. As he made his report to his leader, he gave him a funny look.

"Right... We went to pick up Christopher's group, but...they weren't at the

appointed meeting spot.”

“What?!”

“Instead, we found this letter on the station notice board.”

Holding out a scrap of paper that had been folded up small, the subordinate sighed uncomfortably.

With an unpleasant premonition, Tim took the scrap of paper, unfolded it carefully, and squinted at the words, which were written in bright-red letters.

Dear Boss.

How are you? I’m feeling murderously spiffy myself.

Are you appreciating Nature?

Are you watering the flowers?

I’m not.

If you overwater flowers, they rot.

In other words, the world rots.

So do human hearts.

Right now, there’s a downpour in this town, and it’s putrefying people’s souls.

I rotted first. I have zero desire to do any work.

Fortunately, the day Huey said I’m supposed to start helping you guys out is tomorrow.

As a result, I’m not meeting up with anyone today. I’m going to go goof off instead.

I will go play my brains out.

I intend to use my rotten heart as fertilizer and make the flowers known as memories bloom.

I wonder if I’ll be able to make a hundred friends.

Is one’s number of friends inversely proportionate to one’s number of good friends?

Well, that doesn't matter at all. Anyhow, I plan to enjoy this rainy New York to the fullest.

Don't worry. I'll do my very best not to kill anybody until it's time for the job.

Oh, right: "The twins" are always watching you, so we'll figure out a way to meet up with you on our end.

Rain is also part of Nature. But it's unpleasant.

Someday, I suppose I'll have to settle things with the great will of Mother Nature.

Ha-ha. From Hell.

The distinctive salutation and closing mimicked the letters sent by the criminal in the "Jack the Ripper" incident that had occurred in London during the previous century. They were a complete mismatch with the content, meaning he'd probably used them only out of some shallow fanaticism.

A smell like rusty iron rose from the red letters, making it very obvious what they'd been written with.

On registering that fact, Tim felt irritated by the lousy taste of the note's sender, his companion.

"Damn Christopher. He's messing with us."

"He mentioned Master Huey's name..."

Behind him, his subordinate spoke, sounding uneasy. Huey was a terrorist who was currently incarcerated. If the knowledge that they had ties got spread around unnecessarily, it was patently clear their job would become much harder to pull off.

"Yeah, Christopher knows that, and he's still using it. The bastard's baiting us! If the station staff saw this dicey letter, or if some stranger took it with them, he'd probably say, 'Things just got interesting' and leave it at that."

With an annoyed mutter, Tim turned his eyes to the building in front of them again.

“Right before a job, yet... I wanted to have them look the place over first, at least.”

The pouring rain made the area near the top of the building seem a little hazy. As water dripped onto his face, Tim murmured self-deprecatingly, “Even if it is only about half as tall as the Empire State, *when you think that we’re about to storm it*, it really does feel like a lot of pressure, doesn’t it?”

Tim kept gazing up at it for a little while. Then, abruptly cracking his neck, he spoke to the woman beside him.

“Adele.”

“Y-yes?”

It was possible she hadn’t expected anyone to call her name at this point. Adele, a woman who wore a spear in a sack on her back, looked at Tim in surprise.

“Listen, go find Christopher and the rest and tell them to at least come scope out this building. We’ll head back to the hideout for now, then go check the house where that Jacuzzi fella’s group was.”

“Y-yes, sir!”

Giving a quick, energetic response, Adele started off into the rain—until she abruptly stopped.

“What’s wrong?”

“Um...”

Looking timid, Adele gingerly confirmed an item on their agenda.

“If I find them quickly and end up with free time, then, um...as promised, I’ll go kill Eve Genoard, all right?”

“...”

Eve Genoard.

She was the little sister of Dallas Genoard, who’d taken advantage of the confusion to make a break for it. A hostage, to make it possible for them to move Dallas, their sacrificial pawn, any way they wanted.

She might be a hostage, but they didn't have her in custody. They'd simply told Dallas that if he sold them out, they'd kill her.

"Uh... Well, we don't know for sure that he's sold us out yet."

"Isn't it all right to just keep him tied up now, though? Um, Jacuzzi and the others already saw him 'resurrect'..."

"Yeah, well..."

They'd had two reasons for pulling Dallas into their group. The first had been that Dallas was an incomplete immortal, and he interested their boss, Huey Laforet, as a guinea pig.

The second had been to use as bait, in order to get Jacuzzi and his friends to join their group.

They'd meant to pull them in by giving them an actual demonstration of Dallas's immortality, then telling them, "We'll give you this power, too." If all they'd had to do was show them, they could have just kept him bound hand and foot and taken a slash at him—but if Dallas hadn't been standing beside them as their "companion," there wouldn't have been any point.

If it had looked like they were slicing up a lab animal, it was doubtful whether Jacuzzi's group would have agreed to join up.

To that end, as a simple sort of restraint, Tim had named Eve as a hostage, but...

Ultimately, the attempt had half succeeded, and half failed.

After they'd shown Jacuzzi's group Dallas's resurrection, the plan had been to take Dallas back outside before he regained consciousness, but unexpected chaos had erupted, and they hadn't managed to do so.

In a case of even worse timing, some previous acquaintances of Dallas had been on the scene, and he'd started rampaging. This had been one of the things that had caused the confusion.

When he'd recalled that much, Tim brought up something that had been bothering him.

"By the way, Adele...did you know 'Ennis,' that woman in the suit?"

In the midst of the chaos in the mansion, Adele had shown a unique reaction to the woman in the black suit. She'd even intentionally brought out the name Szilard Quates to see what the other woman did.

In the end, the smoke screen ruckus had broken out immediately after that, so she'd missed the woman's reaction, but— *Who was she? When we asked about Szilard, I don't remember the information broker mentioning the name of a woman like her.*

Not knowing this information annoyed him, and Adele's response only made those feelings worse.

"Um... I'm sorry. It has nothing to do with anyone except the members of Lamia, so..."

"Lamia is a part of Larva, and I'm at the center of that group. You can't even tell me?"

"It may be all right for me to tell you, but...it's something we heard directly from Master Huey, so, um...I would have to ask him..."

Watching Adele, who was speaking without much confidence, Tim heaved a big sigh.

Information straight from the boss, huh?

In Huey's Larva organization, Lamia, whose members included Adele and Christopher, was a unit made up of dangerous personnel who specialized in rough work. Except for the people themselves, no one knew who they were or how they'd come to follow Huey.

Every one of them had deeper ties to Huey than Tim did, but they all had problematic personalities and weren't suited to motivating an organization, so in practice, Tim acted as the leader.

Even as he lamented the current state of the organization, which just wasn't going his way, Tim had stayed loyal to Huey.

He respected the man who had given him a new world, but even so, he showed no mercy to Adele, the man's direct subordinate.

"All right, getting back to the original subject... Adele. Don't kill Eve Genoard

yet.”

“B-but...”

“You *just want to kill people, don’t you?*”

The remark was filled with conviction, and for a moment, Adele fell silent. Then she responded with a troubled smile.

“...That isn’t true.”

“What was that pause for, huh? Well, anyway, you know what I mean: We might still be able to use Dallas, so leave as many pawns on the board as possible.

“But even as we speak, Dallas may be headed to where his sister is...”

“If he is, we’re too late either way, right? In that case, don’t do anything pointless. You’ll just wear yourself out.”

Tim spoke indifferently, and Adele hung her head. She didn’t seem convinced. Before long, though, with an expression of reluctant agreement, she wordlessly left to look for Christopher.

As he watched her drooping shoulders recede, Tim shrugged wearily.

“...Good grief. Why is Lamia so full of messed-up characters?”

Then he pulled himself together again, steeling himself for his meeting with the man he’d see tomorrow, at the latest.

“What kind of sightseeing is he planning to do in this rain...?”



“Rain, rain, the sonaaata of raaaain. ♪”

“Shut up.”

“You’re so mean. I poured everything I had into writing song lyrics in praise of rain, you know... Moistening the three thousand valleys of the woorld. ♪”

“Quiet.”

As Christopher sang deliriously, spinning his umbrella, Chi continued to broadcast his discomfort without even moving his eyes.

“Why? You like singing, too, don’t you, Chi? You sang along with me earlier, back at those warehouses. Come on—let’s sing together... The stiill lethaaaal rain puuunch. ♪”

“What I’m trying to say is that I can’t tolerate your deplorable taste in lyrics. Which do you think is lacking, your ability to understand or my ability to express that?”

“How do you expect me to make that call on nothing but ‘shut up’ and ‘quiet’?”

“...Hmm. Good point. I apologize for the insufficiency of my words. Let me add to them: Your puerile lyrics could not possibly be more annoying, so shut up, or I’ll kill you.”

Broadway in the rain. The wide avenue had been teeming with lively energy until just a moment ago, but now it was completely ruled by rain, and people were either scrambling to get into the theaters, or—if they’d left a show that had just finished—standing in doorways, at a loss, unable to move.

Christopher’s umbrella hid his striking eyes and mouth, but Chi was using a red, Asian-style oilpaper umbrella, so they still couldn’t have stood out more.

“Your taste in umbrellas is pretty remarkable, too. This is New York, you know? The far eastern edge of the American dream. The idea of importing a culture from across the Pacific... I think you’ve got too much ‘frontier spirit,’ don’t you?”

“I don’t believe it’s more of a leap than those eyes and teeth of yours.”

“Wow, we’ve got a real jerk here. How could you talk about somebody’s physical features like that?”

“You got that body because you wanted it.”

When they’d run through similar exchanges five times or so, Christopher finally gave up singing.

Then, gazing cheerfully at the black umbrella he was holding, he murmured as if he were talking to himself.

“Umbrellas are amazing, aren’t they? Real worthy of respect.”

“?”

“See, umbrellas are a product of human intelligence, created in order to fight the rain, to struggle against Nature. They’re probably a clearer rebellion against Nature than any other technology. Clothes, which exist to combat changes in temperature, might be the same way, but they’re already so commonplace that they don’t really feel rebellious. But check out this umbrella! It’s just oozing with the palpable resolution of its developers: ‘Like hell we’re letting the rain get us wet!’”

Christopher showed his sharp teeth in a smile. His red eyes were shining like a child’s.

“Besides, look how efficient it is. The idea of being able to combat the rain, which soaks everything in the whole world, with just a little framework and cloth!”

“In this much rain, I don’t think it’s managing to put up much of a fight.”

Chi’s retort was accurate: In addition to the rain that the wind blew at them, the water splashing up off the ground was getting the pair’s legs very wet.

“As long as our moods don’t get dampened, we win. Well, I’m a Nature lover, and I love myself, too, so I don’t really care which of us wins.”

“...I’m so disgusted I don’t even feel like responding.”

“There, you see? We’ve already got somebody with a dampened mood right here. At times like that, you should sing. Come, come, let’s sing, let’s sing, a song to save your heart, by which I mean, a song to save your world. Ah, the scale’s getting grander... This is fun. Want to kill someone and offer them as a sacrifice?”

“...They said to avoid killing as much as possible except when we’re on the job, remember?”

Christopher’s words seemed to be nothing more than a joke, but Chi immediately hit him with a warning.

Chi had hung out with this guy for many years, and he knew. That hadn’t been a joke, and if he’d agreed, the people around them who were taking shelter

from the rain would promptly have been soaked with a rain of blood.

In response to Chi's words, Christopher shrugged lightly. Then, quietly and far too boldly, he stopped walking and stood still, right in the middle of the rainy avenue.

Fortunately, there weren't enough cars or people out there in the center of the road for him to be in the way. Nevertheless, he looked as though he fancied himself a star of the silver screen or something.

"Hmm. I'm currently standing right in the center of Broadway, but in this rain, I can't feel its famous energy. It's surprisingly blasé this way."

"If you're bored, we could just go meet up with Tim's group."

"Tim is more boring than this, so no. Yuck."

Christopher turned his face away as a little kid would. Then he started walking, looking around, searching for something interesting.

He walked that way, swiveling his head like a clockwork doll, for about thirty minutes.

When they'd traveled a good distance from Broadway, Christopher's eyes came to rest on an odd sight.

"...?"

It was a lone man, running.

A young guy, tearing through this downpour as if possessed. He had no umbrella, and his pale-green fedora was getting drenched by the rain.

From this distance, he couldn't really tell, but the guy might still be young enough to call a boy.

"What a strange fellow. He's accepting the rain, just as it is. And here I am, with an umbrella. I feel like I'm losing."

He puffed out his cheeks crossly, but at the time, he didn't pay much attention to the guy. However— Ten minutes later, when Christopher was standing in one of the alleys that were laid out in a grid, looking around, he realized the same boy was running toward him, up the alley that led off to the

right.

The kid didn't seem to have stopped once since the last time he'd seen him, and it was obvious his legs had just about reached their limit.

If he'd kept up that pace this entire time, he was incredibly tough. Even marathon runners probably couldn't keep sprinting at top speed for more than a few minutes.

Christopher seemed to have taken a new interest in the boy, and as the kid came running toward him on shaking legs, he looked at his face.

"Huh!"

At the sight of the boy's expression, Chris spoke involuntarily.

The look on his face wasn't fatigue from sprinting.

It was despair.

Christopher immediately recognized that sharp, dark, murky expression. It was one that he and Chi had seen many times before.

That said, the cause of that despair had always been created entirely by them, in their capacity as hatchet men...

So he wasn't used to seeing expressions of human despair that had nothing to do with him, and he was also intrigued by the fact that the boy who wore that expression was running so hard.

When the kid had almost come up even with him, his legs gave out. He abruptly pitched forward and crashed to the ground, his feet tangling with each other.

"Oh man."

For a little while, Christopher stayed where he was, watching. But when he saw the boy start trying to get up, even though he was soaked with muddy water, the man involuntarily started toward him.

Chi had been standing silently beside him, but when he realized what his buddy was up to, he spoke, checking him.

"Don't. Getting involved with others' misfortune is never worth it."

“But they also say others’ misfortune tastes like nectar, don’t they?”

Winking with one red eye, he walked over, splashing through puddles.

Not caring that he’d get wet, he held his umbrella out to the boy in front of him.

...To the boy who ran a portion of the city’s underworld and whose name was Firo Prochainezo.



What’s up with this guy?

That was Firo’s first impression of the man who held the umbrella out to him. He may have been in the depths of despair, but it was patently obvious the man who’d appeared before him was abnormal.

Stiff, formal, aristocratic clothes, the sort Western European nobles had worn a century or two ago.

Red eyeballs with white irises and jet-black pupils.

His grin revealed a mouthful of sharp fangs, like dolphin teeth.

Judging by appearance alone, he was clearly not normal. It wouldn’t have been odd for an individual faint of heart to scream in terror.

However, Firo wasn’t a Camorra executive for nothing. His eyebrows only drew together slightly, and then he waited calmly for the other guy to make his next move.

Internally, Firo still felt a raging despair over Ennis, but his caution regarding this man had temporarily erased it from his face.



At seeing Firo's expression, the fanged man spoke kindly to the boy, who looked like a drowned rat, smiling all the while.

"Are you okay?"

The words were gentle, and they didn't seem to go with the man's fangs. Eyeing him, Firo took another good look at the guy's face.

If you ignored those eyes and teeth, he was a debonair, agreeable-looking young guy who seemed to be somewhere around twenty.

"..."

"What's the matter? You'll catch a cold, running around in a downpour like this."

The suspicious man's words were kind through and through, and as Firo responded, he felt perplexed.

"Thanks... It's nothing to do with you, though."

With that, Firo checked on his legs.

His tired muscles had already recovered quite a bit, and the cells he'd destroyed by pushing them past their limits had completely regenerated.

"...See you."

Firo was about to take off running again, but he found his body wouldn't go anywhere.

The red-eyed man had grabbed his arm and was holding him in place with extraordinary strength.

"Hey...let go," Firo demanded, irritated.

He was using the voice he used at work, a threatening voice that didn't go with his face.

Ordinarily, he'd have asked the other guy what was going on, but this really wasn't the time. He tensed his arm in an effort to shake the man's hand off, glaring into his red eyes.

However, the red-eyed man didn't seem the least bit disturbed by Firo's

voice, and when he spoke, his expression was mild.

“Even if I let you go, it’s not as if you have any idea where you’re going. Right?”

“!”

Bull’s-eye.

Sensing something unfathomable in the other’s eyes, Firo instantly focused all his muscles—which had been ready to start sprinting again—on the man in front of him.

“I saw you earlier. You looked like you’d lost something precious and were trying to find it, but you weren’t running like you had a destination in mind. You’re just wandering around without a plan, aren’t you?”

“...”

What are you?!

You’re not involved here; what do you know about it?!

Firo wanted to yell and scream, but the things the man had said had been too accurate, and he couldn’t work up the strength to squeeze the words out of his throat.

“From the way you’re not arguing, I guess I was right.”

The man grinned, showing rows of jagged teeth. The way his teeth overlapped with each other created a neat zigzag line. It seemed as if, instead of being something he’d been born with, they’d been artificially created after the fact.

“If you don’t mind, would you tell us about it? We might be able to help you somehow.”

“...I already told you, it’s none of your business.”

“Is your precious thing so cheap that you can be stubborn about stuff like finding it on your own?”

“...”

That one had hit Firo where it hurt, but even so, he had no intention of asking

for help. If it had been Maiza or Randy and Pezzo or his other friends who'd said those words, he probably would have discarded his pride easily.

But why should he have to ask fellas he'd just met?

"Oh, of course: I haven't introduced us yet."

Realizing that Firo was eyeing him, Christopher tidied himself up with his left hand—the one that wasn't holding the umbrella—looking as if he'd caught himself making a careless mistake.

"I'm Christopher Shaldred. I just got to New York, but I have some pretty good connections, so I think I'll be useful to you. It's a pleasure."

He bowed graciously, then gestured to the man who stood beside him.

The other man was holding a red oilpaper umbrella, and at a distance, his Asian appearance stood out more than Christopher's did.

"He's Hong Chi-Mei, 'Chi' to his friends."

"...Charmed."

"And I think Leeza's probably around here somewhere, but... Well, I'll introduce her later."

Firo listened to the man, but his suspicion and wariness hadn't disappeared completely.

In the first place, why was he trying to get involved in this situation? And who in the world was this odd guy?

Questions welled up one after another, and Firo tried to put them into words. But as if he'd been seen right through, the red-eyed man spoke with a gentle smile.

"There's no real reason. You see, my employer told me to come to this city to help out on a little job, but inconveniently, there's nothing for me to do until tomorrow. I wanted to find a new friend in this new town, that's all."

Christopher said these childlike sentences matter-of-factly. Firo watched him suspiciously, but he wasn't able to read where the lies ended and the truth began in the young man's red eyes.

“...That’s it?”

On seeing that Firo clearly didn’t believe him completely...

“Three things are important to me: the blessings of Nature, the jobs I’m given, and handmade blades. The last one is—”

Grinning cheerfully, Christopher stated his reason for lending Firo a hand quite plainly.

“—killing time.”

Something in the depths of Firo’s heart was nagging at him. He asked Christopher an inconsequential question.

“Didn’t you just say four?”

“Huh?!”

“I mean, there were three things that were important to you, right?”

“...The concept of ‘important things’ is different for everybody. Trying to anchor concepts with numbers may be clever, but I’m not a fan. There’s no romance in it.”

Oh, I get it.

Christopher had smiled wryly as he murmured the words, and as he listened, Firo realized what the nagging feeling was.

They’re similar.

The face of a man who was Firo’s childhood friend surfaced in his mind.

This guy... His personality’s a whole lot like Claire’s. Claire Stanfield’s.

CHAPTER 4
RED EYES AND RED HAIR

CHAPTER 4

RED EYES AND RED HAIR

“I bought umbrellaaas.”

Tick and Maria had been sheltering from the rain in an abandoned building, but it didn't look like the rain would be stopping anytime soon, so Tick had run to the station and purchased umbrellas.

Even though it had been just a few minutes away, the rain had soaked Tick all the way through to his underwear.

“...Thanks, amigo.”

Murmuring, Maria gave a weak smile.

The fact that she'd blamed Tick a minute ago still weighed on her heart, but he was acting as though it hadn't even happened. Although this relieved her, it was also a shackle that made Maria feel incredibly guilty.

That said, Tick might have genuinely forgotten.

“Hmm, what should we do? It wouldn't be great to just head back home now... We don't know where Ronny from the Martillos went, eiiither.”

Tick worried about what to do next for a little while, but before long, he gave a small nod, then took Maria's hands and pulled her to her feet.

“Let's try going back to Jacuzzi and his friends' house, one more time.”

“Huh...?”

For just a moment, Maria hesitated.

The place where she'd fought the spear woman in mortal combat.

The place where she'd suffered abject defeat.

“Somebody might've gone baaack there.”

“R-right. You're right.”

What if that spear woman had gone back?

Imagining it, Maria instantly felt her heart freeze over.

Am I scared? Me?

“Are you okay?”

“Ah-ha-ha! I’m fine! It’s like you just said, Tick: That wasn’t a loss! Right? Besides, next time I do that, I’m absolutely going to win! Believe me, amigo!”

It was something she didn’t want to admit, so Maria put on her very best show of bravado for Tick.

The truth was, even she understood.

She knew that, no matter what Tick had said, in the end, unless she was convinced personally, it didn’t mean a thing.

She also knew that, once she was convinced, in order to truly get over it... she’d have to beat that woman.

There might be another way.

The thought had crossed Maria’s mind, but she was positive this method was the only one she had now.

The way she’d lived up till now couldn’t be changed easily.

For that very reason, she’d thought, she had to settle things in accordance with that way of life.

But can I win? she asked herself.

Can I beat that woman—no, that spear?

That spear wasn’t just any spear, and on top of that, its owner had been quite used to combat.

Before Maria could close the distance to the range her Japanese swords needed, the space commanded by that spear, which was nearly twice as long, barred her way with a density that was overwhelming. Using both her blades, she’d tried to punch through the gaps in that density, but its range was so wide that it extended off to the sides, and the blades of that cross had knocked the tips of her swords away every time.

If I at least had the same range as that spear—

When her thoughts had taken her that far, Maria shook her head fiercely.

Up until now, hadn't she beaten opponents armed with guns, weapons whose ranges were several times—or dozens of times—greater than that spear? Thinking she'd lost because of a difference in range was the same as admitting that her *katanas* had lost.

However, it was true there was an actual difference in fighting distance.

When she fought guns, she compensated for that by slipping through the line of fire and getting right up close to her opponent: in other words, by using her own techniques as a *katana* user.

Could she do the same thing with that spear?

Not only that, but could she manage it against an opponent she'd just lost to, before she accumulated any new training?

It wasn't as if she knew everything her opponent had up her sleeve, and there were many elements that made her nervous.

Most of all—she was frightened she might lose to that spear.

She wasn't afraid of dying. What scared her was having everything about the life she'd lived up until now negated, of having Japanese swords, and Murasámia, denied.

Realizing her fingers were trembling, Maria squeezed her hands into tight fists to hide it.

Whether he'd noticed this or not, Tick peered into Maria's face, smiled for no good reason, and encouraged her.

"It's okaaay. I'll believe this time for sure. All right? You won't lose to anybody, Maria."

The young man's eyes were as innocent and direct as a child's, and in the gap between his slightly closed eyelids, those eyes reflected Maria's face like a mirror.

Growing embarrassed about not being able to shake her unease, Maria

noded firmly, trying even harder to hide her hesitation.

Returning that absolutely baseless smile, Maria looked Tick full in the face for the first time.

It might have been because she was, quite simply, jealous of his smile.

“Right. Thanks... Really, thank you, amigo.”

Taking an umbrella from Tick, who looked a bit mystified, she headed outside on her own two feet.

Holding unease and determination simultaneously, she stepped out into a city of rain that seemed liable to wash everything away.

Stepped out, as if to hide her racing pulse in the sound of the downpour...



An abandoned factory by the Hudson River

“...Like I said, those guys were planning to get rid of you fellas from the very beginning.”

In the center of the factory, under naked lightbulbs that sporadically snapped and crackled, Jacuzzi’s friends surrounded Dallas, who was speaking with great self-importance.

As soon as Dallas had arrived at the abandoned factory Jacuzzi and the others were using as a hideout, he’d started to act arrogant, as if he were a very important guest.

All of Jacuzzi’s friends were disgusted by the attitude, but since Dallas was a valuable source of information, they couldn’t treat him too badly.

They could have tortured him and gotten the information that way, but it was painfully obvious Jacuzzi would be against it, so even the people who thought of it didn’t attempt to suggest it.

Even without that, though, Dallas began to spill information about Larva and immortal bodies with startling frankness.

Rather than “spilling” the knowledge, he spoke with an energy that seemed to say, *I’m doing you a favor by telling you this stuff, so you better be grateful*, and

he actually did say “You better be grateful” over and over again.

“You better be grateful. If I wasn’t telling you this stuff, they woulda made you their throwaway pawns, and you’d have been on your way to the afterlife before you even knew what hit you.”

“Huh...”

Jacuzzi and his friends listened to Dallas’s story as if it were a fairy tale from some far distant land.

Dallas started his narrative back when he’d become immortal. Needless to say, as he related it, he generously embroidered the parts that had been inconvenient for him, but even without that, to Jacuzzi and the others, the story sounded far too outlandish.

Jacuzzi had once encountered the Rail Tracer, a paranormal *thing*, and so he was able to accept the story to a certain extent. Although, if he hadn’t actually seen Dallas’s “constitution,” the business about the liquor of immortality and the underground society of influential people in all sorts of fields would probably have been impossible to believe.

They hadn’t swallowed his story wholesale, but since the “immortal” known as Dallas actually did exist, they had to believe it.

That said, in the process, Jacuzzi’s group ran up against another question: “Um... So the doll at the mansion, Ennis... She was a crony of that bad guy, Szilard?”

“Yeah, she don’t look like it, but she’s a monster who’s killed lots of people.”

Dallas had no idea what Ennis’s career as a murderer was like, but in order to make his story bigger, he created a suitable past for her. That said, Ennis actually had killed several people, so it wasn’t a total lie.

“But...it looked like she knew Isaac and Miria...”

“Isaac? Oh... Nobody cares about that dim-watt couple.”

I see—so that sap’s name is Isaac, huh? Maybe I’ll remember it for when I kill him.

As a matter of fact, Isaac and Miria were on Dallas’s “to kill” list, but

mentioning this to Jacuzzi's group seemed like a bad move, so he decided to keep quiet about it.

"Um... Also, Dallas...is it true you're related to the owner of that mansion...to the Genoards?"

"That again? I told you that a million times already."

Dallas spat the words out, annoyed, just as a voice spoke up in a different direction from Jacuzzi.

"That's the most unbelievable thing here."

Jacuzzi had been planning on just backing down, but Jon, who was wearing his bartender uniform, broke into the conversation. He looked unconvinced.

"So...you're seriously Miss Eve's big brother?"

"Hunh?"

A man had come out of nowhere and said his little sister's name, and in spite of himself, Dallas's eyes narrowed.

"How come you know Eve, pal?"

"Huh? What are you talking about? She's the one who loaned that house to us: Miss Eve, the current head of the Genoard family."

"?!"

The news had been abruptly shoved in his face, and this time it was Dallas's turn to doubt his ears.

Eve's the head?! ...What's that supposed to mean?! What happened to my old man and my brother?! Did they bite the big one? Did they check out for good?!

Dallas was a little shaken, but then he drew a deep breath and thought.

If they actually croaked...I couldn't get any luckier!

After all, if that was true and he proved he was alive, all the family assets would be his. This greedy man didn't mourn his family's deaths in the slightest; he just got his hopes up over the money he might get.

Because Dallas didn't know about the Genoard family's decline, he simply

assumed that fortune was finally smiling on him.

“Eh? What’s the matter?” Jon was looking at him suspiciously.

Dallas cleared his throat, covering for himself, then continued with what he’d been saying. “Uh... Yeah, well, Eve’s my little sister. I’m back now, though, so that makes me the head of the family. Don’t you forget it.”

“Not like I care, but...Miss Eve was incredibly worried about you. It made me wonder what kind of bastard you were... But even then, I didn’t think you’d be this rude.”

Jon’s words were loaded with sarcasm. Ordinarily, the development would have set veins popping out on Dallas’s face, but now, he showed no particular reaction to it.

He’d just visualized his little sister very clearly.

Dallas had been called “lowlife” and “scum” by all sorts of people, and he’d actually lived up to that bad reputation. The one thing that tied his heart to society, even though he was the type to consider his own father’s death a stroke of good luck, was his little sister, Eve Genoard.

She was his Achilles’ heel (although Dallas wasn’t as strong as Achilles to begin with) and the one being he showed kindness to.

“...She’s got nothing to do with this. I’m me.”

He responded to Jon’s sarcasm indifferently, then avoided even looking at the guy.

Maybe because they’d picked up on the change in his expression, neither Jacuzzi nor Jon pressed him for anything else about Eve, and for his part, Dallas didn’t say another word about his little sister.

Dallas’s sister was his weak point. In fact, even now, he was trying to kill Tim and Adele to protect her.

Yet, he never told Jacuzzi and the others that Eve was being treated like a hostage.

This was partly because it had nothing to do with his using them. More than that, though, he was afraid of having strangers find out about his weakness.

Even now, Dallas was worried about his sister.

Right before he'd headed for the restaurant where Firo Prochainezo was, he'd made one phone call, but for some reason, no one had picked up.

He'd thought they might already have been attacked, but there was no way anyone could have gotten from Manhattan to New Jersey in the time between his escape from the mansion and his phone call.

Even as Dallas's unease spurred him on, now that he couldn't make sure Eve got away, he had to make that other thing happen.

In other words: He had to get rid of Tim, Adele, and the other Larva members.

And in order to do that, he needed to figure out how to stir up this group of young punks. How could he get them to see Tim and Adele as Jacuzzi's enemies?

Dallas hadn't heard everything about Larva's objective, either. However, he did remember them saying they needed pawns to storm some location somewhere.

To that end, Dallas filled them in on the organization known as Larva, with half of the explanation consisting of guesses and things he'd made up.

At this stage, it was likely they didn't actually have that liquor, the method for becoming immortal.

In other words, it was probably safe to assume the liquor was being kept at the place they were planning to attack.

"Yeah, they said they were gonna have you people attack the place where it's stored, and while you did that, they'd get the liquor."

Dallas didn't know whether the liquor they were after was the "failed" sort he'd gotten or the "complete" version. Either way, though, he could imagine what would happen after that.

"Once they've got it, they'll either get rid of you, or... No, they might let you drink some of it. As a reward, see. But who knows what they're gonna do after that? One of 'em might be a complete immortal; maybe they're planning to feed you to them."

Tim had only called Jacuzzi and the others “sacrificial pawns,” and he hadn’t actually said a thing about what would happen afterward, but Dallas kept talking as though they planned to ultimately kill their group.

Again and again.

“That said... You people saw me, a real live example of immortality, one of the biggest secrets there is. Whether or not you cooperate with Tim-the-bastard and company, they’re probably planning to rub you out at the end.”

“No...”

It seemed to be gradually taking effect: Jacuzzi looked down, his expression uneasy.

“I guess we picked up some ugly customers.”

“What do we do?”

“They’re selling us short.”

“Hya-haah.”

Jacuzzi’s punk friends were beginning to speak up, egging him on. However, Nice, Jon and a few others were still listening to Dallas with expressions that seemed to say they weren’t yet sure where they stood.

“Wait just a moment, please. It’s still too early to say for sure.”

“I’m not actually saying this guy’s a liar, but he does have some guesses mixed in there.”

They were wary of Tim’s group as well, but they’d probably never lost sight of the possibility that Dallas might be lying.

Tch... You’re just scum, so act like it, wouldja?

Even as Dallas inwardly clicked his tongue in frustration, he spoke as if he still had plenty of leeway.

“That’s fine. You don’t have to believe me... I mean, whatever happens to you, it’s no skin off my nose.”

Jacuzzi brooded for a little while at the jab. Then, in an attempt to get the basic information organized, he asked Dallas a fundamental question.

“Um... You said you didn’t know what sort of organization these Larva people were, but...is it okay to assume Tim is their leader? Isn’t there someone in a higher position, or some other syndicate that’s backing them?”

“You think they’d fill me in on something like th...?”

Dallas started to answer, then remembered something and stopped.

Come to think of it, he said something the first time I saw him.

“We’re a band of psychotic weirdos.”

No, before that.

“We serve Mr. _____—and we’re a band of psychotic weirdos.”

Yeah, that’s right. It was—

“Huey Laforet...”

As he retraced his memories, he’d murmured the word casually.

Even he was impressed he’d remembered it.

He’d seen the name before, in the papers or something, so it might have made a particularly vivid impression on him.

“That’s right... They said their boss was Huey Laforet...”

He’d muttered almost as if he were talking to himself, but it had an astonishing effect on his surroundings.

The people who’d been noisy up until then went quiet all at once, and they all looked at a girl who stood a little ways from the rest of the group.

“?”

Not understanding what their reaction meant, Dallas looked at the girl, too.

She had golden eyes and black hair, and the atmosphere that hung around her clearly set her apart from the punks around her.

The woman’s eyes had gone wide, and she was watching Dallas with a stunned expression.

“Wh-what, huh?”

Dallas spoke, sounding creeped out, but the woman didn't respond. Instead, Jacuzzi asked a question.

"Um...are you sure?"

"...What? What about it? Did that Huey fella do something?"

"No, it's just...he's sort of connected to us. I've never met him, but..."

Huey Laforet.

In general terms, he was famous as a terrorist who'd plotted a rebellion against the federal government, but he had another, special significance for Jacuzzi's group.

About two years ago, Jacuzzi and his friends had planned a train robbery, and in the process, they'd encountered terrorists who were attempting to hijack that same train.

That terrorist group had been the Lemures, and their goal had been to secure the release of their leader, Huey Laforet, who was in police custody.

In their large-scale operation, the entire train had been taken hostage, but a variety of other motives—Jacuzzi, another group plotting to hijack the train, and a monster known as the Rail Tracer—had come into play, and ultimately, the Lemures had been destroyed.

One of the group's few survivors was currently working with Jacuzzi's group.

That girl was the one at the center of all those gazes. Her name was Chané Laforet...and she was Huey Laforet's biological daughter.

Jacuzzi and every one of his friends knew this.

Nevertheless, without reservation, they had accepted Chané as their companion.

After that, they'd all lived uneventful lives in New York, and no one had really commented on her origins.

...Not until just now, when Dallas had said Huey's name.

"What...? What's going on?"

Dallas didn't understand the situation, and the abrupt change in mood

confused him.

But there was one individual who was several times more confused: Chané Laforet herself.

Why?

Why would my father's name come up here?

When she found herself abruptly confronted with that fact, a sharp shock had run through Chané's entire body.

If her father was the one behind the people who'd called themselves Larva, everything made sense.

The fact that they'd known about the immortals, and their attempt to create new ones: If this was all part of one of her father's "experiments," then it was entirely understandable.

Had they known about her, though? Chané had her doubts, and she'd realized it was impossible to determine whether they had from their actions.

Her father was the sort of person who could view even his own daughter as a guinea pig. To the best of her knowledge, there was only one person he treated as human, besides himself.

Father doesn't get unassociated people involved and kill them. He'd confessed, to Chané alone, that this was "because it would make Elmer sad." She hadn't had the opportunity to meet Elmer in person, but she knew he was her father's friend.

The only time her father showed genuine emotion was when he spoke about Elmer. Conversely, whenever he talked about anyone else, he always seemed slightly detached.

Her father wouldn't kill those not involved. At the same time, when it came to people who were relevant—the individuals and groups her father had designated as "guinea pigs"—he could do incredibly cruel things without turning a hair.

For that very reason, Chané was worried.

If...if Father sees Jacuzzi and the rest as guinea pigs...

If he does, I'll probably be counted as a guinea pig as well.

I don't mind that. If it's for my father's sake, he can have me.

But...Jacuzzi...Nice...Donny...Jon...Fang...Jack...Nick...

The names of the friends who currently surrounded her surfaced and vanished, one by one.

They knew her past, and they'd still accepted her without comment.

They were companions in the truest sense of the word, completely different from what she'd had with the Lemures.

If her father told her to sacrifice them, what would she do?

She'd probably prioritize her father's words.

But Jacuzzi and the others were also important to her, second only to—or no, by now, just as important as—her father.

The more she thought about it, the more frightened she grew.

Fear.

That emotion hadn't existed for her until she met Jacuzzi and the others.

When she'd come to this city, for the first time, she'd gained people she could lose.

She wouldn't have regretted losing her own life, but now, the idea of losing her companions terrified her more than anything.

Just as Maria feared the loss of her own pride, right now, Chané was on the brink of being swallowed up by violent, quaking emotion.

"...What? What about that doll?"

"No... It's, um..."

Dallas's question had been directed at Jacuzzi, but Jacuzzi's response was noncommittal, not really an answer at all.

However—just then, they sensed that something was wrong.

The air around them seemed colder than it had been a moment ago.

As if *something* that hadn't been there before had entered the factory while their attention was elsewhere...

Dallas looked for the source of the feeling, which was no more than an intuitive hunch, and spotted its physical form right away.

The golden-eyed girl everyone was watching.

Behind her... Although there was no telling when it had arrived, a new figure stood there.

Dallas, Jacuzzi, and every other person present had been looking in Chané's direction.

Yet, not one of them knew the exact moment that figure had appeared, except for the figure itself.

"Oh..."

Realizing who it was, Jacuzzi made an involuntary noise.

Chané didn't seem to have noticed the presence behind her yet. She was still struggling with the doubts welling up inside her.

Just as the emotion in the eyes of the woman in the black dress became a shiver that began to spread to her upper arms— —the figure moved soundlessly, softly hugging Chané's slim shoulders.

An abrupt embrace from behind.

For a moment, Chané froze up, but the instant she realized who the person behind her was, she looked relieved.

That said, the change in her facial muscles was very slight, and to anyone who wasn't used to her, she probably would have looked as expressionless as before.

"It's okay."

When he sensed that Chané's tension had relaxed slightly, the figure murmured, trying to set her mind at ease.

"It's okay. Don't you worry about a thing. *I'm here.*"

The incredibly arrogant voice told her, without knowing what she was worried

about, to rest easy about everything simply because he existed.

But Chané knew.

The words seemed irresponsible, but they held a steady, ultimate “strength.”

A man who could imbue plain words with power, just by speaking them. At the very least, Chané and Jacuzzi, and everybody else except for Dallas, understood that being.

Dallas, the only one who didn’t know about the other guy, felt his own body temperature falling in response to the mood of the thugs around him.

“What...the...?”

When Dallas squeezed the air out of the depths of his lungs, the man who was gently hugging Chané looked his way, just for a moment.

Then, as if to say he’d sized Dallas up in the space of that moment, he ignored him completely and circled around to stand in front of Chané.

Dallas felt as if he’d been disrespected.

However, Dallas’s heart wasn’t taken over by anger and the urge to slaughter the offender, as it normally would have been. He just gulped and kept watching the guy’s every move.

If I take my eyes off him, he might kill me. The guy who’d suddenly showed up in front of him radiated pure, painfully straightforward intimidation.

Under the light of the naked bulbs, his red hair seemed like the warning coloration of a poisonous animal.

Not good.

Internally, Dallas felt his ego frankly admit defeat.

This guy...is bad news.

Although he didn’t know it, the pressure he was feeling now was very similar to what Jacuzzi and the others had felt from Ronny Schiatto.

When Ronny had appeared, Dallas had been caught between two choices—black out or get killed—so he hadn’t noticed. However, if you’d asked someone who knew these two directly, the first common trait they’d give was that

neither was a person you wanted to go anywhere near.

Jacuzzi's group had seen two men who'd managed to tame that sort of aura and wear it around, one after the other. Even so, they weren't as tense now as they'd been with Ronny, probably because they understood that this man wasn't an enemy.

"Mr....Claire."

Jacuzzi spoke, breaking out in a cold sweat. The figure he'd called "Claire" responded without turning around.

"Felix."

"Oh... S-sorry, Mr. Felix."

"Claire is the name of my soul. The only one who's allowed to use it is Chané. I told you that several times already, remember?"

It sounded as if he was teasing, but the man's air of intimidation hadn't softened.

A name only Chané, who couldn't speak, was allowed to use. It sounded absurd, but nobody argued.

The man who'd been called Claire, and had called himself Felix, gazed at Chané for a while. Before long, he smiled gently and stroked the cheek of hers that had a faint scratch on it.

"...No big injuries anywhere else?"

His words were kind, but they were also firm. Chané quietly shook her head.

The next moment, Felix gave a small sigh—and the ominous pressure that had filled the factory dispersed.

"I see... Well, you know. You look good; that's great."

When she heard that, Chané gazed back at Felix as if she wanted to say something.

"Hmm? Oh. You were worried about something like that? Seriously, it's fine. You're more important to me than work... Ah, if it's about Jacuzzi and company, don't worry. I'll talk Luck around, and I'll do something about that Ronny fella,

too... Yeah, I won't let 'em lay a finger on your friends."

He was speaking as if Chané had said something to him. Yet, not only had she not said anything, she hadn't even opened her mouth.

Even so, the redhead went on cheerfully.

"Huh? Oh, that's all right. I'll do something about your old man, too. After all, he's my future father-in-law."

In a clear, resonant voice, Felix kept speaking to Chané, who was silent.

"Only— Whoever scratched your face. They're gonna pay for that... No, well, it's less for you than because I personally can't forgive them."

If you focused on just him, it looked as if he was having a conversation, and getting mad, all by himself.

To a bystander, he probably looked like a nutcase.

But if that person paid attention to Chané's reactions, they'd see that she was nodding or shaking her head in response to what he said and occasionally giving something like a faint smile... She really did seem to be talking with him.

"Um."

Finally unable to take it, Jacuzzi spoke up, addressing the sweethearts who almost looked as if they were conversing cheerfully.

"...You can tell what Chané wants to say?"

"Of course I can."

The man nodded, brimming with confidence. Jacuzzi looked at him, then shifted his gaze to Chané.

Picking up on Jacuzzi's unspoken question, Chané promptly nodded.

In other words, the conversation really was going both ways. Chané had confirmed it.

"But how? She's not using sign language or anything."

Nice shook her head in amazement, and Felix responded, looking mystified.

"Just look in her eyes. It's all there."

“That’s insane.”

“Well, see, I love Chané from the bottom of my heart. That’s why.”

Felix said the words without a blush. He probably meant every bit of them.

Deciding that arguing anymore was pointless, Jacuzzi clammed up, still looking boggled.

Chané also looked mildly appalled as she watched the man in front of her, but her cheeks seemed to have a bit more color in them than usual.

Apparently, she was embarrassed.

Beside Chané, who wasn’t very expressive, the man waved his hands in an exaggerated manner, trying to move the conversation forward.

“Okay, so, what do you need me to do?”

Sounding unconcerned, Vino, aka Felix Walken, scanned the factory’s interior. Then, locking eyes with Dallas—who looked as if he had no idea what was going on—he stopped dead and spread his arms in a gesture that was even more theatrical.

“Any player who wants to use a pawn like me...had better be careful not to get hurt when he picks that piece up. You feel me?”

Those last words had clearly been directed at Dallas.

“Wha...?”

The situation had left Dallas in the dust until that point, but now he’d been abruptly pulled up onto Felix’s stage.

“Wha... What the hell are y—?”

“Yeah, never mind, it’s fine. I heard your story.”

Since he didn’t know when the guy had entered the factory, he didn’t know how much of the story he’d heard.

Dallas didn’t feel like arguing, though. As Felix watched him, his gaze held a powerful will that permitted no argument whatsoever.

If Dallas defied him, he might get killed.

Caught by that illusion, Dallas gave a small, reluctant nod.

“So, getting right to the point, we both know what this is. You’re trying to turn Jacuzzi and these guys into your pawns and use them to take out that Larva group. Is this one of those things? A personal grudge?”

“Wha...?!”

He’d hit the nail on the head, but Jacuzzi and the others were startled, too.

The easygoing members who were cackling and being noisy were one thing, but Jacuzzi, Nice, and Jon had caught on to Dallas quite a while back.

Even so, they hadn’t called him out on it. They’d just kept an eye on the situation. And now that Felix, who’d shown up later, had pointed it out so bluntly, they were at a loss for words.

“That’s just crazy... What are you talki—?”

“Yeah, forget that, don’t bother.”

Felix waved his hands, cutting Dallas off.

“I hate troublesome stuff. Let’s just be direct here.”

With no hesitation, Felix walked right up to Dallas’s chair, put his hands on his shoulders, and stuck his face right up close to the other guy’s.

He was smiling, but there was a power in his voice that brooked no argument.

“That’s fine. No matter what you’re planning, now that I’m here, there won’t be any problems.”

He went on in a voice Jacuzzi and the others could hear as well, speaking so arrogantly that he made Dallas’s earlier attitude seem commendable.

“No matter what a small-timer like you is planning—it doesn’t bother me. No matter what a snot-nosed kid like you tries to hide from me, I seriously doubt it could damage my life. Jacuzzi and his pals aren’t dumb, either. So—if you want to use me, or us, you just go right ahead.”

The indifferent words held a clear threat to them.

In exchange, you’ll use me right back, huh?

This was probably what people called “wordless pressure.” True, right now, it was working like magic on him.

“Because I’m gonna use you right back.”

What, you’re actually saying it?!

The exchange had been brief, but he’d seen far too clearly that this was no ordinary guy.

This man wasn’t the type to use trickery tailored to the psychology of his opponents. He simply put his ideas into action, with zero hesitation.

...And those actions held a confidence with a rock-solid foundation.

This guy... He’s got everything I don’t have, all the power. Yeah, all of it. Absolutely everything, every sort of thing you could call strength!

When he registered that fact, the emotion that welled up in his heart wasn’t envy. It was fear.

Is it okay for a bastard like this to exist?

He hadn’t actually seen what Felix could do, but he was able to participate in this sort of exchange, in a place like this, without any hesitation at all. That alone was enough to give him a good idea of the guy’s power.

Dallas was completely spooked by this unknown entity, this “Felix,” but he couldn’t cut and run.

Even as he broke out in a cold sweat, on the surface, he chose his words carefully, attempting to cover for himself.

However, before he could get the words out, Felix cocked his head to one side and spoke.

“Say, are you hiding something else?”

“...!”

“Yeah, you are. I can tell! Well, it doesn’t matter.”

Hiding something? He was hiding so many things he didn’t know which one the guy meant.

The abrupt question confused Dallas. To make matters worse, he accidentally blurted out a stupid response: “—How do you know about that?”

Dallas didn't know what he was supposed to be hiding, but for the moment, he'd decided to admit that it was fact.

He had no idea what sort of answer the other guy was going to give. He just waited for him to say it, sweating in apprehension.

“Hmm? Instinct, maybe, or maybe I can see it in your eyes... Huh. When I actually have to put it into words, I can't find any cool ones. Well, let's see. Long story short—”

After he'd spent a while choosing his words, in the end, he said a line that could have belonged to a magician in a children's story.

“—I can do anything.”



Millionaires' Row

Night had nearly fallen, and in the darkness, only the sound of the rain echoed loudly over the broad avenue.

The light that filtered through the many mansions' wide windows illuminated the ornamental plantings in their front gardens, and the water droplets struck each individual leaf rhythmically, reflecting the light.

The high-class neighborhood seemed rather desolate, and in it, a man and a woman were walking quietly through the sound of the rain, under umbrellas.

“Hmm... I'll need to do proper maintenance on my scissors when we get hooome, or they're going to rust.”

“You're right. It's about time I gave Murasámia a good sharpening, too...”

Looking at their weapons, which were exposed to the spray the rain had kicked up, Tick and Maria murmured to each other, smiling wryly.

“Weeee don't treat our blades very well, do we?”

“That's not true. I take care of mine every day!”

“They say the thing that hurts blades most, after not taking care of them, is

cutting living things.”

“Ah-ha-ha, that’s gotta be a lie, amigo. I heard the more you cut, the stronger they get.”

As they continued their dangerous conversation, the torturer and the hired killer arrived in front of the residence that was their destination.

Due to the scale of the earlier ruckus, it seemed a little ragged around the edges, but there was no conspicuous external damage, and naturally, the smokescreen that had filled it was gone without a trace.

“Huh...? The lights are on.”

Noticing that soft light was streaming from the ground-floor windows, Tick and Maria exchanged looks. They’d been discussing how, after that uproar, it was possible that no one had come back, or that, even if they had returned, they might pretend they weren’t home.

“Do you think somebody’s there?”

“It could be the cops, amigo.”

True, if the neighbors had seen that smokescreen and heard all the noise, the police might have been sent in. In a poor district, things might have been different, but this was Millionaires’ Row, home to many wealthy and powerful people. Any kind of to-do would stand out here, so that was a definite possibility.

“What should we dooo?”

“For now, let’s watch and see how things look.”

They were wearing scissors and Japanese swords at their waists. If the police spoke to them, and they tried to fudge things by telling them they were a barber and an opera actress, they suspected they wouldn’t buy it.

The pair watched the place for a little while. Then, since there didn’t seem to be a police presence in the area, they decided to keep their guards up and ring the doorbell.

Ding Di-ding

A subdued sound echoed.

It didn't ring loudly outside; the noise of the rain almost drowned it out.

Worrying that it might not really have rung inside, Tick moved to try again, and just then— "Yes...?"

The door opened feebly, and the current mistress of the house peeked out.

"Hmm? Who might you be, miss?"

Tick went and asked the question they, the visitors, should have received instead.

You couldn't really blame him: Tick and Maria had expected the punks to appear, and instead, here was a pretty girl in her midteens.

There had been a few young girls among Jacuzzi's friends as well, but there wasn't a hint of their dark atmosphere about this girl.

She seemed to be entirely unconnected to the underworld, the type of girl who would be described nicely by the terms *young mistress* or *sheltered young lady*. Tick and Maria, who were deeply involved in underworld society, were more than a little disconcerted.

"Pardon? Um, I'm Eve Genoard."

The girl answered her visitor's question conscientiously.

For a little while, she gazed uneasily at the pair. Then a thought seemed to occur to her, and she spoke abruptly.

"U-um... Could you be Fang's friends?"

"Huh?"

Maria and Tick exchanged looks again, thinking.

Who was Fang?

Of the thugs who'd been here, the only name they'd known was Jacuzzi, the leader.

Did this guy belong to their group, or was he someone completely unrelated?

He could have been a repairman who was fixing damage to the interior

caused by the ruckus, or he might be with the police.

However, if they told her they weren't his friends, how could they explain themselves?

"Um..."

"That's right, amiga!"

Beside Tick, who'd cocked his head to the side and was thinking hard, Maria responded with a bright smile.

("Maria?")

("It's fine, it's fine.")

Ignoring the two, who were whispering together quietly, Eve smiled as if relieved. "Oh, I see! I'm so glad... I'll go call him now!"

"Gee, thanks, amiga."

"?"

She probably hadn't understood what the word *amiga* meant. For a moment, Eve looked blank, her eyes round; then she promptly regained her smile and walked away, into the depths of the house.

"Fang, Faaang."

At the sound of the girl's voice, a man poked his head out of a parlor a short distance away from the entrance hall.

He was Asian, with distinctive narrow eyes, and he wore a cloth tied around his head.

"Hey, what happened while I was out shoppi...?"

He must have assumed they were members of his group. He spoke without checking to see who it was, then stopped partway through, realizing something felt off.

"...Who're you?"

"Huh?"

Fang's expression had hardened, and Eve was the first one to react to it.

Hastily, she turned around—but Maria had already launched herself off the entryway floor.

The girl gasped in surprise, and in the space of that small breath...

When the moment had passed, the situation had been settled, and the air in the mansion had frozen completely.

“Don’t move, my cute little *chica*.”

Maria had drawn Murasámia and, before anyone knew what was happening, had circled around behind Eve with a light leap. She was now holding the sword to the base of the girl’s white throat.

She pulled Eve backward, keeping the wall of the hallway behind them, and faced Fang, who was farther inside.

“Aaaaah!! Miss Eve?!”

The moment he understood the situation, Fang yelled, but there was nothing he could do, and he stiffened up right where he stood.

“Waaaaaah, Maria, what are you doooooing?”

Tick protested lackadaisically, but Maria gave a little wink as if to say *No worries*, then turned back to Fang, still looking aggressive.

“Ah-ha-ha! I don’t really have to explain this situation, do I? I’ll just ask my questions.”

With the blade at her throat, even as her fear threw her into confusion, Eve tried to struggle free of Maria’s arm. Maria was stronger than she looked, though, and she wouldn’t let Eve put up the slightest resistance.

Maria spent her days brandishing a heavy Japanese sword in each hand, and the muscles in her arms were toned because they really had to be. For her, restraining a girl with one arm probably wasn’t any trouble at all.

“Your name’s Fang, right? Listen... Are you a friend of Jacuzzi’s, amigo?”

“...”

When Fang hesitated, Maria went on with a smile like a mischievous little boy’s.

“You don’t actually have to say, amigo! If you’re in this house, you obviously are! ...Besides, even if you don’t know him, this girl might.”

As she murmured that, Maria pointedly stuck out her tongue.

Tick tilted his head in bewilderment, troubled by his companion’s forceful methods, but he wasn’t trying very hard to stop her. He probably knew she wasn’t actually planning to cut anybody.

“Rrgh...”

“Sorry ’bout this, amigo... Hmm?”

As Maria looked at Eve, who’d cried out and was continuing to struggle, she seemed to remember something.

“Have I met you somewhere?”

At those words, Eve momentarily stopped fighting, turned her head, and looked at Maria’s face.

At first she didn’t know what she was talking about, but at the sight of the woman’s unique appearance, something gradually started to tug at her heart.

Then, when she began fumbling through her few memories in New York, an idea occurred to Eve.

“Were you...at the newspaper office with Mr. Luck, last year...?”

“...? Ah. I remember, amiga. You’re the kid Vino brought in, right?”

They hadn’t spoken directly, and they hadn’t been introduced.

A year ago, when Eve had been pulled into a certain incident, she’d been taken to the offices of a newspaper publisher, and they’d seen each other there for just a moment. That was all.

Ordinarily, they would probably have forgotten it immediately, but Eve remembered Maria’s flashy outfit, while Maria didn’t normally have any contact with girls who seemed to be from good families. This one had apparently made a deep impression on her.

“Why...? Are you Mr. Luck’s friend? Why would you do this...?”

“You know my boss?”

That's a problem.

She'd taken a hostage on impulse; she hadn't even dreamed she might be one of Luck's acquaintances.

She couldn't back out now, though. Pulling herself together, she spoke to Fang.

"Okay... Where's this Jacuzzi guy? If you don't take us to him—I don't know what I'll do."

Giving a troubled smile, she said exactly what she was thinking:

"Because, see, right now, I seriously have no idea what to do."



"Dallas, huh? That sounds like the name of a town."

In an abandoned building they'd found on the south side of Grand Central Station, Christopher had listened cheerfully to Firo's story.

The building had been one of the meeting places for Szilard's organization, and although the two men had no way of knowing this, Tick and Maria had used it to shelter from the rain up until a moment ago.

"So your only clue in your search for your special person is this fella Dallas, right? ...Still, it's odd he left a threatening letter but didn't make any demands."

"That's the sort of guy that thug is. I've only seen him once or twice, but that twisted bastard loves watching people suffer."

"What a nasty way to put it."

Christopher spoke as if this were somebody else's problem, but despite his rising irritation, Firo continued to fill the guy in on the situation.

I picked up a weirdo.

This actually *was* "somebody else's problem" to Christopher, but as it turned out, they were going to help him look for Ennis. Firo hadn't intended to pull a brand-new acquaintance into this, but Christopher had been pushy, and he hadn't managed to turn him down.

It was also true that, right now, no matter what sort of people they were, he

wanted as much help as possible in his search for Ennis.

He'd considered going back to Alveare temporarily and getting his friends, but he didn't have any clues. On top of that, only a limited number of people knew Dallas's face, so going around as a crowd hadn't seemed like a good move.

Besides...I left that threatening note at the restaurant, so Maiza and the others should know that Ennis and Ronny got snatched.

Ennis was Firo's rent-free roommate, but Ronny was one of the syndicate's high-level executives. Unless it was terribly inconvenient for some reason, even if Firo didn't ask, they'd probably have the whole family out looking for him.

Come to think of it...

After he'd finished giving Christopher a rundown of the situation, something abruptly occurred to Firo, and he started turning it over in his mind.

When Ronny left to look for Isaac and Miria, he said he was headed out for a job and that the other thing was "on his way." If I remember right, he said he was going to settle things with that group of kids from Chicago or something...

Could that group be connected to Dallas?

In an attempt to get any hint he possibly could, Firo decided to find out more about them. Either way, he'd just dashed out at the time, so it would probably be a good idea to contact Maiza at this point.

"I'm going to run to the station and make a phone call. Wait here," he told Christopher and Chi, then tried to break into a run, but— "Hold it."

—Christopher caught his arm and held him back.

"What?"

When Firo turned around, there was a black umbrella right in front of his face.

"You should take this."

The red-eyed guy smiled quietly and handed his umbrella to Firo.

"...Thanks."

Thanking him briefly, Firo put up the umbrella and ran off into the rainy night.

The rain was as brutal as it had been before, and he was grateful for the umbrella as he went.

His face sure doesn't look like it, but he might actually be a pretty nice guy.

"Hey. Are you actually planning to help find those people?" Once Chi was sure Firo had gone, he spoke up, the disgust obvious from his tone.

"It's the grand first step in my 'hundred friends plan.'"

"We have to help Tim's group out tomorrow."

"When the time comes, then, we'll prioritize that."

"Don't say that like it's nothing."

Chi looked cranky. As Christopher responded, his expression seemed to say he couldn't understand what he was unhappy about.

"Besides, if he insists on not letting us do what we want—"

Showing his fangs in a gentle smile, Christopher spoke simply.

"—we can just get rid of him."

"...You'd rub out your 'friends' that easily?"

Chi's gaze was cold. Christopher thought for a little while.

"...The death of a good friend. In life, that sorrow is a wall everyone must overcome someday. You can't stay sad forever."

"The state of your brain makes me sadder than anything." Chi heaved a sigh, then posed a question to him, his face still expressionless: "Christopher. What am I to you?"

"A good friend. What about it?"

Christopher answered immediately, with a perfectly frank smile.

"Just *how many decades* do you think we've spent working together? No matter how many friends I make after this, I seriously doubt I could make a better friend than you, Chi. Oh, and I mentioned this before, but I don't swing that way, so don't worry about it."

The answer didn't soften Chi's expression. He went on calmly, "Then, if I

disobeyed Master Huey, would you kill me?”

He'd asked the question without any hesitation, and the red-eyed youth didn't hesitate to answer it.

“Of course I would! What about it?”

His expression said, *Why would you ask me something so obvious?* The man's emotions were endlessly pure, and Chi heaved another sigh.

“In a way, Master Huey deserves respect for having raised you to be this twisted.”



The Empire State Building A certain office

“That Firo. Compared with how he feels about Ennis, he doesn't seem worried about me at all,” Ronny muttered with a wry smile; he had a hand on his cheek and was tapping his temple with his index finger.

“Well, never mind.”

Ignoring Isaac and Miria, who were messing around with the office's imports behind him, Ronny continued gazing impassively at the cityscape visible through the window.

“However...I am concerned about that lot he's met up with...”

Firo wasn't here, but Ronny understood his situation so well it was as if he'd actually seen it.

He moved to tap his temple one more time, then abruptly paused his finger midmotion.

“Well, never mind. Any more than this, and I'll have nothing to look forward to...”

Ronny gave a shady-looking smile, and from beside him, Ennis spoke, sounding bewildered.

“Did you just say something? Something about Firo...?”

“Don't worry about it.”

“Yes, sir... But what are we going to do now?”

Quietly, Ronny answered Ennis's uneasy question.

"Tomorrow, I need to go speak to that Jacuzzi fellow one more time. Do you want to come along?"

"Huh?"

"You're curious about that group, aren't you?"

Speaking softly, Ronny turned his hawkish eyes on the town that spread out below them.

As if he could see everything that was about to happen...



The abandoned building

“Still...that’s strange.”

“What is?”

Chi, who’d been silent up until then, spoke as if he’d realized something.

Christopher looked puzzled by his partner’s dubious murmur.

“You mean the fact that there’s an abandoned building like this one right by Grand Central Station? There’s nothing wrong with that. We were looking for a place to get out of the rain, and it’s the greatest blessing we could have asked for. We should be grateful to the bank panics for creating abandoned buildings.”

“Not that.” Flatly negating Christopher’s comment, Chi muttered, his brow creasing. “Why hasn’t Leeza put a stop to this?”

Bringing up the name of their invisible companion, Chi put a hand to his forehead, clearly concerned.

“Put a stop to what?”

“To this whim of yours. Ordinarily, she’d be starting to make fun of you right about now— Or if he’s really in the way, she’d be *getting rid of* that Firo guy.”

“What’s the problem, then? I bet Leeza approves of my hundred-friends plan, too.”

In response to Christopher’s optimistic answer, Chi heaved a deep, deep sigh.

“Leeza’s ten times more loyal to Master Huey than you are. On our side jobs, she always goes along with your whims, but she wouldn’t let you get in the way of Master Huey’s work.”

“Wow, do I look that short on loyalty? I’m a hundred times more loyal than Leeza!”

“...For that contradiction to be valid, you’d both have to have zero loyalty, but I really couldn’t care less. Or maybe Leeza’s run into some sort of trouble—”

“I haven’t.”

The words seemed to echo all through the interior of the abandoned building.

Christopher's and Chi's ears picked up a sultry female voice. However, as always, she was nowhere to be seen. Only her voice showed her presence, enveloping Christopher and Chi.

"...You were here?"

"My, is that a problem? It isn't as if I've been peeping, so what does it matter?"

Ignoring the voice's teasing, Chi calmly repeated his earlier question.

"You were listening to us, correct? Why aren't you stopping Christopher?"

"Goodness, I don't feel like getting in Chris's way right now. Remember what he said before? We aren't helping Tim and the others with their work until tomorrow."

Leeza giggled as she responded. Chi narrowed his sharp eyes even further and went on with his questioning.

"Is that all? Or... Does that Firo guy's story have something to do with this job, or with Master Huey?"

"My, my... Chi, that's too great a leap. Are you saying that everything I don't complain about has something to do with Master Huey? You really are paranoid, aren't you? Why don't you become a notorious detective who's prone to delusions?"

The voice laughed mockingly, but in the next moment, the laugh stopped dead.

"Well, *you are right, though*," she murmured.

"I"

"What does that mean?"

Chi's eyes widened, and Christopher stared into empty space curiously. Since he was focused on someone who couldn't be seen, there was no help for it, but to a bystander, it would have been an incredibly creepy sight.

"I can't say yet, and in any case, I think it would be better if I didn't. Most of

all, I only heard from the twins that it ‘might be related’ a moment ago, so either way, I don’t know the details.”

“...And why did you need to make fun of me?”

“Life is quite dull, isn’t it?” The voice muttered as if it were talking to itself, then went on speaking as if nothing had happened. “There’s a message from the twins for Chris, too.”

“What is it?”

“Adele is wandering around town looking for you. It’ll be awful if she catches a cold in all this rain.”

In response to the teasing tone, Christopher muttered a soft “Hmm,” then stretched as if bored.

It was a lithe, feline stretch, and it made it seem as though his body were made of sponge or rubber.

“Okay then, Leeza. Tell Adele we’re here.”

“! Hmm. Did you decide to get to work?”

Chi’s eyes had gone round, as if this was an unexpected development. Christopher quietly shook his head.

“What are you talking about, Chi?”

“?”

“Obviously, if we’re looking for somebody, the more people we have, the better.”

Christopher delivered his declaration with an artless smile, and Chi let his steel-clad arms hang limply.

“...I just understood something quite clearly: Apparently, I don’t think of you as a close friend.”

“D-don’t tell me you thought of me as a lover?!”

Christopher backed away, turning pale.

“You’re a ‘friend’ I can’t manage to shake. It’s been, what, thirty-eight

years...?”

A young guy who seemed to be only around twenty, no matter how you looked at him, had spoken those words to another young man who was probably about the same age.

If someone else had heard it, they’d likely have taken it as a joke, but Christopher accepted it with a troubled smile.

He seemed to be brooding about something, and he also seemed as if he wasn’t thinking at all.

An awkward silence had nearly enveloped the two. Only Leeza’s untraceable laughter twined around them.

Cheerfully, ever so cheerfully...

She giggled...

And giggled...

And giggled...



“Is it really this way?”

In the midst of a downpour so heavy that they could see only a few steps in front of them, an odd group was headed west, down an avenue in Manhattan.

“...Yeah.”

As he responded, the Asian guy who led the procession looked sour.

A young woman dressed like a dancer and a blond girl walked behind him, leaning close to each other under a single umbrella, like sisters.

Beside them, a young man with several pairs of scissors stuck into his belt followed the Asian guy who walked in front of them. He seemed to be thinking hard about something.

When they left the broad, deserted avenue and turned onto a slightly narrower road that led to the Hudson River, Fang spoke from the front of the group.

“Listen, that’s enough, isn’t it? Why not let Miss Eve go and hold me at sword-

point instead?”

“No can do, amigo. It’s easier for you to stay honest this way, isn’t it?”

To all appearances, Eve and Maria were walking companionably close to each other. However, Maria stood behind her, and her slim fingers were on the hilt of the sword at her waist, ready to draw at any moment.

She wasn’t being held directly at sword-point, but if she drew and slashed at her in the same motion, it would come to the same thing.

As a matter of fact, the probability of a lethal wound was much higher than it would have been if she’d just put pressure on a blade she was holding against her.

“Fang, don’t mind—”

“Don’t mind about you? I can’t do that. If I tried something like that, Jon would deck me, Miz Nice would kill me, and Jacuzzi would cry at me.”

Sighing and speaking as if he’d half given up, Fang led Tick and the others to their designated emergency meeting place: an abandoned factory by the Hudson.

When he’d heard they were messengers from the Gandors, he’d known in a general way what they were there for. The pair didn’t look much like negotiators. What on earth was the Gandor Family planning?

As Fang’s worries about the future grew, he began searching for ways to let Eve get away unharmed.

When Fang had returned from shopping, he’d found a deserted mansion and—hesitating in front of the house, not sure how to enter—the mansion’s owner and her retinue.

Apparently, she’d decided to stay here for a while to search for her brother. Fang had thought it was odd that nobody was inside, and when he’d found countless cuts and scratches at the back door and in the entrance hall, he’d decided that something must have happened.

“Oh, great Jehoshaphat! Even the vase has been smashed...!”

It was the butler, Benjamin, who’d spoken: He’d seen the fragments of the

vase farther down the corridor.

No, Jacuzzi did that... Well, never mind.

Eventually, it had been decided that Benjamin and Samantha would go to the police, and Fang had stayed behind to watch the house with Eve, but...

After Benjamin and Samantha had driven away, these unreasonable visitors had arrived.

He didn't know what had happened, but from their conversation, it seemed clear this couple had had something to do with all those scars in the entrance hall.

Fang had decided not to put up any useless resistance and to show these two to the abandoned factory.

Isaac and Miria were probably with them. I hope they're okay.

While Fang was thinking things like this, different ideas were quietly operating behind him.

Tick was gazing into Maria's face, looking worried. His characteristic smile had faded a bit.

"Hmm..."

"What's the matter? Is there something on my face?"

Maria spoke with a smile, but her attention hadn't entirely left Eve.

She'd had Eve hold the umbrella and had continued to give off an insincere air of subdued menace, telling herself that all she had to do was stay on the alert so that the girl wouldn't try to run.

Maria wasn't seriously planning to cut the girl, but if she didn't exude an aura that threatened murder, her hostage wouldn't be effective.

Tick probably understood this as well, of course. He didn't seem all that worried about Eve's physical safety. That said, neither of them was giving much thought to Eve's spirit.

The spray from the rain wet Maria's cheeks and hair, making her look rather bewitching.

Tick gazed steadily into her elegant face, lowered his voice just a little, and murmured: “Listen, let’s not take a hostage, okaaaay?”

“...What are you saying all of a sudden, amigo? We’re a torturer and a hired killer. It’s a little late to worry about the impression we’re making on people, you know?”

Her comment didn’t hold a shred of consideration for the Gandor Family’s reputation, but Tick didn’t point this out. Instead, he just told her what was in his heart.

“You’re pushing yourself, Maria.”

“—Huh?”

“Didn’t I tell you? I said you hadn’t lost yet... But, Maria, you’re anxious. You’re really, really flustered.”

“Wha...?”

Her attention shifted.

Maria’s awareness wavered from Tick to Eve and back like a seesaw.

Eve seemed to have registered the change in the woman behind her, and although she hadn’t been listening to their conversation, she began to pay attention to it.

The fierce rain made their surroundings noisy, but Tick’s voice became a low pulse that shook Maria’s heart.

“Maria, the truth is, deep down, you think you did lose, don’t you? That’s why you’re trying to cover it up, to forget. You’re trying to finish this job up with a bang and boost your confidence.”

Ssssssst.

Cold electricity ran down Maria’s back.

It felt as if someone had gouged an old wound open—or rather, as if someone had wrenched open the top of a wound that had been forcibly closed with tape.

Everything Tick had said was accurate, and his words had pierced right through the heart of Maria’s philosophy of action.

Feeling herself start to sweat all over, she desperately searched for words to deny what he'd pointed out.

However, none of them even qualified as excuses, and she wasn't able to refine them to the point where she could speak them aloud.

"H... How...do you know that?"

"Hmm... Well, I torture all sorts of people, you know? That means, although I don't get 'feelings,' I do kinda understand 'emotions.' So I could tell you were really impatient, but you were trying really hard to hide it... You had the same eyes as the people who keep pretending to be tough for a while after I've cut them with my scissors."

Even as he brought out that unpleasant comparison, Tick kept speaking slowly, thinking as he went.

"And— Maybe it's because I've been thinking, all this time."

"...About what?"

"You told me I couldn't understand your feelings, so I've been thinking and thinking, trying to do it. I've been thinking about you all this time, trying to figure out what you feel. Um, and so, I watched your expression and the look in your eyes and things—and I figured that might be it, so I said it."

Tick answered bashfully, then sent Maria a smile with no thought behind it.

It was his usual innocent smile, and there wasn't anything precocious about it.

"Sooo, was I right?"

"Tick..."

The guy was tilting his head to one side with an expression like a bunny's, and Maria shook her head as if she didn't know what to do with him.

"See, things like that... Even if you know, amigo, you shouldn't say it."

As she murmured the words, Maria sounded pretty disgusted, but she was also smiling faintly.

It really was very faint, but it wasn't empty bravado. With her normal ingenuous expression— —Maria had definitely smiled.

Eve felt it very clearly.

Now, in this moment, she'd be able to escape from the woman with the *katana* easily.

Although she made no attempt to do so.

When she'd looked back for a moment, she'd seen the smile of the woman who'd taken her hostage.

She just hadn't been able to think of that smile as belonging to somebody bad.

I wonder if Dallas is able to smile like that...

Regretting having used her own brother for comparison, Eve promptly drove the idea from her mind.

Still, I wonder who took him away.

I wonder if I'll really be able to see him again...



Manhattan SoHo

“That’s a shock.”

Tim exclaimed in honest amazement at the sight in front of him.

Sitting astride a chair he’d turned backward, he surveyed the inside of their temporary hideout.

Several young people, brought here by Dallas, were standing there in a row. They were Jacuzzi Splot, Nice, Jon, Donny, and Nick: the punks from Chicago.

Only the main members were inside. Outside the window, he saw others hanging around, scattered sparsely enough that they wouldn’t be suspected of anything.

After taking another look at the faces assembled in the not-so-spacious parlor, he spoke to Dallas, sounding impressed.

“Not bad. After going through *that*, I figured you’d abandoned your sister and made tracks.”

“...Eve had better be safe.”

Tim was smiling sardonically, while Dallas glared at him with naked hostility.

Taking that murderous intent calmly, Tim told him the facts without hiding a thing.

“Adele was about to go kill her, but I made her hold off. You’d better be grateful.”

“...!”

Dallas’s deadly rage flared up instantly, but realizing that his sister was still safe, he curbed his anger at the last moment.

Observing Dallas’s expression as if it had nothing to do with him personally, Tim then turned his gaze to the young tattooed fellow.

“So. I hear you’ve decided to help us with our job.”

“Yes... Only, you meant that promise, didn’t you?”

“Right, right. Once the job is done—we’ll give you bodies like Dallas’s.”

Tim treated the miracle of immortality as if it were a ration of bread. Quietly rising from his chair, he looked the others up and down, as if gauging their intentions.

“Still...even if you did see a live demonstration, you believed in it real easily. Didn't you ever think I might be tricking you?”

“We don't have time. We don't know when the mafia in this town might come after us... Right now, we'll cling to any power that will keep us alive.”

The tattooed guy looked down as he spoke. Tim smiled, looking satisfied.

“Ha-ha, I know. We know a bit about your situation. When we found out the Gandors and Martillos had you in their sights, we weren't sure what was going to happen—but it actually sped things up for us. That was helpful.”

He broke off for a moment then, sending Jacuzzi a sharp look from behind his glasses.

“By the way, where's the broad in the black dress who took a slash at me?”

“We left her behind. You feel safer that way, too, don't you?”

“...Well, I'm more concerned about why she attacked me...”

At that extremely natural question, Jacuzzi's gaze swam, bewildered. “Um, well... She was probably annoyed.”

“Man, there's a great reason for ya.”

He was clearly trying to hide something with that answer, and Tim looked unconvinced—but in a move to gloss things over further, Jacuzzi broached the main topic: “Um... So what is it you want us to do?”

“Huh? Ah, sorry, my bad. Things were confused this afternoon, and I didn't get to tell you the most important stuff.”

Tim lowered himself into the chair again, tapped the table beside him with a finger, and spoke.

“...Long story short, in order to make you immortal, we need a certain 'liquor.'”

“Liquor?”

“Right. Well, if you want to call it something flashy, it’s the ‘liquor of immortality.’ That said, it really is the cheap stuff, to the point that it picked up the moniker ‘failed.’”

Jacuzzi and Nice exchanged looks, but without telling them specifically what about it had “failed,” Tim continued his explanation, unconcerned.

“A long time ago, a certain alchemist mass-produced this ‘failed’ stuff. The alchemist got eat—uh, went missing—and for a while after that, we lost track of the liquor, but...we found out a certain corporation had stolen it and was stockpiling it.”

At that point, Tim stopped speaking for a moment, gave a devil-may-care smile, and then went on.

“And so, we’re just taking the liquor from the hands of that big old robber, Nebula, and returning it to its rightful place.”

Nebula.

At the sound of the name the guy had dropped so abruptly, Jacuzzi gulped a bit.

Nebula was one of the biggest conglomerates in the country, or rather, in the whole world. If assets were power, the large corporation would have been on equal terms with a small country.

Take it from that huge corporation and return it to its rightful place, Tim had said.

Since he’d gone to a group like theirs about it, of course, the method wouldn’t be legal.

Picking up on this, Jacuzzi narrowed his eyes slightly and asked, “In other words, you want us to help you steal?”

“Close, but no cigar. It’s not stealing.”

Tim smiled, shaking his head, then revealed the contents of the job to Jacuzzi in one brief phrase.

“—It’s armed robbery.”

Just as he'd finished going over the basic outline, the phone rang, and one of the Larva members picked up the receiver.

After he'd spoken for a short while, he called Tim, gave a brief report, and handed him the receiver.

"It's from Adele. She says the twins told her where Christopher is, so she's heading over there now."

"The twins are as creepy as ever. Where are they watching from?"

Feeling spooked by the go-betweens who worked directly under Huey, Tim put the receiver to his ear.

"Adele, huh? ...Everything went great over here. —Yeah, Dallas came back, too... For now, you stay with Christopher. Don't worry about anything today, but tomorrow, get them to the site on time—"

Ignoring Tim, who'd started on his phone call, Jacuzzi and the others conversed in whispers.

"...I-is this gonna be okay? It sounds like it's a much bigger deal than we thought it would be..."

"We've already come this far, Jacuzzi, so we'll just have to do it."

Beside Nice, who was encouraging him, Jon was frowning.

"What's the matter, Jon?"

"Nothing... Something's bothering me a bit, that's all."

"Wh-what?"

At Jacuzzi's unease, Jon's forehead creased. He explained what had occurred to him just a moment ago: "Fang went to do some shopping, and we forgot all about him..."



By the Hudson River The abandoned factory

"...Were you pulling our legs, amigo?"

"No, wait! I'm the one who wants to know why they aren't here!"

In an abandoned factory, which echoed with the sound of the rain drumming on the roof, a pathetic yell with a Chinese accent reverberated.

In the center of the cluttered room, Maria had her *katana* pointed at Fang.

When they'd stepped into the abandoned factory where they'd expected to find Jacuzzi, it had been magnificently empty.

Maria had pressed Fang hard, thinking she'd been tricked, but from his confusion, he apparently hadn't been lying.

"Whoa, Maria, calm dooown."

Once again, Tick's restraint of his partner, who was holding a drawn sword, was laid-back.

Beside him, Eve—no longer a hostage—was helplessly watching the situation unfold.

If Maria took one step closer to Fang, Eve was planning to stop her, even if she had to jump on the woman's back—but then she felt a gust of wind fly past her.

The moment the girl realized that that wind had gleamed silver—
—a sharp, metallic clang echoed in the abandoned factory.

"...Who's that?"

It was Maria who'd hissed it.

The look in her eyes had changed dramatically from what it had been a moment before, and she wore a smile that was a complicated mix of wariness, anger, and curiosity.

In a flash, she'd shifted the *katana* she'd been pointing at Fang down to her side, knocking the silver thing that had flown at her to the floor.

The sticklike silver object at her feet was a small knife, specifically designed to be thrown.

Everyone in the factory slowly turned to look in the direction the knife had come from— —and there stood a young woman in a black dress.

She held large knives like the sort soldiers used, one in each hand, and her

golden eyes glared sharply at Maria.

“Chané!”

Fang looked upon his knife-adept companion as if he’d just been rescued.

Meanwhile, having seen the other woman, Maria smiled fearlessly and drew her second sword.

“I see. I hadn’t settled things with you yet, had I, amiga?”

Why was she here, all by herself? The question never crossed Maria’s mind. All she felt was that she’d found an opponent she could use to fully resolve the mess of feelings in her mind.

“...”

For her part, Chané was radiating wordless anger at the woman who was holding her friend at sword-point.

The sharp looks that flew between the two women scattered sparks.

Tick watched them, looking troubled, but...

Abruptly, he realized there was another presence in the room.

“Hmm?”

A man was standing behind Chané, hidden in the shadows of the industrial machinery, in a place where the light of the electric bulbs didn’t reach him.

Tick couldn’t tell who he was at first, but then he saw hair as red as blood surface in the darkness, and he realized he knew this guy.

Maybe he’d registered the fact that Tick had noticed him. Slowly, the figure emerged, coming to stand in the light. “...What, it’s you, Tick? So you’re the Gandor messenger?”

On seeing Claire/Felix appear from the darkness, Tick spoke up, sounding glad to see him. “Woow, Vino, it’s been forever.”

“Vi...Vino!” In contrast to Tick, who seemed happy, Maria froze in astonishment. “What’s Vino doing here?!”

“That’s my line.” Responding brusquely, Claire turned to Tick and offered

aloofly, “Why is the amigo-woman with you? And actually, you’re their torture expert; why did they send you to negotiate?”

“Um, Mr. Luck saaid the Martillos already had control of these talks, but we had to at least show uuup. They picked me because I was freeee.”

“...Nobody told me that, amigo.”

Maria looked at Tick with round eyes, but she wasn’t particularly angry.

As long as she got to cut things, that was enough for her, and that desire was completely unrelated to Luck’s intentions. Since that was how she thought about it, she was apparently just appalled by Tick’s carelessness.

“...Oh, for crying out loud. I’m just not into this anymore.”

Maria lowered her swords and called to Chané.

“If you’re still up for it, though, I’ll play with you. What’ll it be, amiga?”

For a moment, Chané blinked as if she wasn’t sure. Then, still paying close attention to Maria, she looked at Vino, who’d come up beside her.

Immediately picking up on his beloved fiancée’s intent, Vino spoke to her, trying to set her at ease.

“It’s all right, Chané. Tick’s my friend, and this amigo-woman *is weak*, so I can fix her any way I want.”

“...”

Claire’s taunt sent a full-body shiver through Maria.

Registering that momentary oddity, Claire thought for a little bit, then asked, “Hmm? That was a pretty big overreaction to the word *weak*. Did you...maybe lose to somebody other than me lately?”

“...!”

There was no provocation or pity in the question; it came from simple doubt and curiosity, and Maria broke out in a cold sweat. She couldn’t answer it any other way.

The wound in her heart was gradually recovering, but Vino had his finger on it.

“Bull’s-eye?”

“It’s none of your business, amigo.”

Up until that afternoon, Maria’s emotions would have exploded by now, but at this point, since time and Tick’s words had healed her spirit little by little, she managed to keep her cool somehow.

“Well, it’s not like it matters. As long as you’re alive, you can make a comeback. Besides, you know, if I say you’re weak, don’t let it get to you. I mean, compared with me, 99.99999 percent of the world is weak.”

“...Someday I’m going to cut you down, too, amigo.”

“The fact that you didn’t say ‘right now’ proves you’re still weak.”

Vino didn’t pursue the matter further. Instead, he walked back to Tick and the others, as if he was tired.

“Yeesh. Chané and I were getting in some quality alone time, and then you show up and wreck it...”

Ignoring the fact that, behind him, Chané was blushing, Vino looked at the girl beside Tick.

“Hmm? ...Wait, you’re a friend of Keith’s wife and Luck, aren’t you?”

“Huh?”

Eve stared back at him, eyes round: He’d spoken to her abruptly, and on top of that, what he’d said had been accurate.

Even so, she couldn’t find the slightest trace of Vino in her memories.

Seeing that the girl looked bewildered, the redheaded guy put a hand to his head, as if he’d just realized something.

“Ah! Right, that’s right, I was wearing a fake beard and glasses that time.”

Nearly two years ago, Vino and Eve had met during a certain incident, but Eve didn’t seem to recognize him, and she grew even more perplexed.

“So what brings you here?”

In response to the question, Fang, who had been standing dumbfounded up

to that point, spoke up hastily.

“Felix, she’s, you know, the young lady who’s loaning us that house.”

At Fang’s answer, Vino whistled, and Chané, who’d seemed disinterested up until then, looked a little startled and glanced at Eve.

“What? What about the kid?” Maria asked, mystified, as if asking Eve’s question for her.

“No, I was just surprised. That’s incredible. You can be proud of that. I’m almost never surprised.”

“?”

“Who’d have thought that Dallas fella’s little sister would be such a cute young lady?”

“——!”

Vino’s words sent a jolt of electricity through Eve.

“Dallas... Do you know my brother, Dallas?!”

“What gives? Why is that such a shock?”

“P-please tell me! Where is he— Where is my brother now?”

She sounded desperate, and with no hesitation, Vino told her the truth.

“He’s on *an infiltration job* with Jacuzzi and the other guys. You’ll probably see him tomorrow.”

Just then, they heard someone run into the abandoned factory.

Maria and the others were wary, but as if he’d known who it was from the sound of the footsteps, Vino called the intruder’s name, sounding unconcerned.

“Jack, huh? How was it?”

Panting, the man reported his results. “It’s fine... Barely any doubt on their end. It sounds like they’ll be attacking a building with that Dallas jerk tomorrow.”

“Which building, where?”

The man spent a few moments catching his breath, but then, gulping, he gave

the name of the place where all misfortune was converging.

“They call it Mist Wall—that big white building Nebula’s got!”



“So tomorrow, we’re attacking the Nebula building, Mist Wall? Think we can see it from here? No? That’s too bad.”

Inside the abandoned building, which echoed with the sound of rain, Christopher was spinning around and around, as hyper as ever.

Firo wasn’t back yet, but as if to take his place, a woman had joined them.

“U-um... And so, uh...Tim says to at least go scope it out...”

“I see. Yes, looking things over beforehand is important, Adele. Tim’s absolutely correct... But I don’t wanna.”

“Wh-what?”

Adele sounded distressed, and Christopher waved his hands, as if he were pacifying an angry person.

“I mean, if we go look in advance, the thrill will be gone, see? Besides, I promised I’d help look for some people today.”

“B-but...”

“So you help, too, Adele. Come look with us.”

Moving the conversation along in a tone that allowed no argument, he began describing the substance of the task in detail without waiting for the woman to respond.

“See, we’re looking for three people: one apparent kidnapper and two kidnappees. Their names are—”

“Dammit... Nobody cares. Even the boss and Yaguruma say ‘Ronny’s there, so it’s fine’... If it were fine, they wouldn’t have gotten kidnapped in the first place, right?”

When, muttering, Firo returned to the abandoned building, he saw that an unfamiliar woman had joined Christopher and Chi.

“...? Who’s this?”

“Ah, I’ll introduce you. This girl is Adele! She’s an old friend of mine.”

On being introduced in an energetic voice, the timid-looking woman turned to Firo and ducked her head.

“Uh, sure. Nice to meet you.”

How’d she find them when there’s no phone here?

The doubt did cross his mind, but he decided to continue the conversation without mentioning it.

“Sorry; it doesn’t sound like my friends are going to be any help, but...two of the people I’m looking for went to see a guy named Jacuzzi Splot—”

“Yeah, that’s fine. We know.”

Christopher cut him off, smiling breezily.

Except, to an outside observer, the air surrounding him seemed liable to transport onlookers to a place that was the polar opposite of “breezy,” thanks to his unusual eyes and teeth.

“Huh? What do you mean, ‘you know’?”

“See, Adele says she knows where that Dallas person is.”

“...? ...! F-for real?!”

The moment he understood what the other guy had said, Firo closed in on Adele in spite of himself.

“Why...? What does he mean?!”

“U-um, I...”

Adele was flustered, and Christopher, who was standing beside her, spoke up instead.

“Well, the thing is, Adele apparently saw the Jacuzzi guy today.”

“She saw Jacuzzi...?”

“And there was a woman in a black suit named Ennis there.”

“! Th-that’s her for sure!”

At the time, there were almost no women who wore black suits in New York. Deciding that that meant it had to be Ennis, Firo excitedly urged him to go on.

“So where is she now?!”

“See, there was a bit of a rumble at Jacuzzi’s place, and everybody lammed off every which way. She says she doesn’t know where she went after that.”

“I—I see...”

“There’s no need to let it get you down, though.”

Hiding several key facts, Christopher said something designed to pique Firo’s interest.

“What was his name? Dallas...? Right now, it sounds like he’s going around with Jacuzzi and his group of punks.”

“! ...Seriously?”

I get it. It all makes sense. That bastard Dallas and the punks with Chicago accents were in cahoots... So Ronny went to that Jacuzzi fella’s place on a job, they went after him, and then Dallas pulled in Ennis, who’d tagged along... Is that how it went?

While Firo arbitrarily convinced himself of things, his anxiety kept growing.

“And so, tomorrow, there’s a place where Dallas is definitely going to show up, but—”

“Hold it.”

Calming down at the very last minute, he organized the questions that had piled up in his mind.

Why do you know this stuff? Who are you people—?

“Um...” Interrupting Firo’s thoughts, Adele added quietly, “Um... At Jacuzzi’s... house...there was a person named Ronny, too...”

“Ronny? Yeah, he probably was.”

“That man...um... I mean... *What on earth is he?*”

“Huh...?”

The abrupt question left Firo at a loss for words.

Ronny was one of his bosses and his knife-fighting teacher. He was also an immortal, like Firo.

At least, that was what Firo knew him as.

“What do you mean, ‘what’...?”

He knew he couldn’t talk about the immortals, so he wasn’t sure how to answer, but then— “It doesn’t matter what that Ronny person is, does it? It’s nothing to do with us.”

—Christopher threw him a rope, smiling his usual smile at Firo.

“And,” he went on, “when it comes to saving your special person, it doesn’t matter what we are. Isn’t that right?”

It was as if he’d read Firo’s mind.

The odd sense of wrongness that Firo had been feeling since they’d met once more stealthily reinforced his wariness of the man before him. “...Yeah, that’s right.”

Even as he muttered the words, he was filled with the determination to figure out who these people really were, no matter what. He thought they might even be the ones who were in league with Dallas.

Firo’s guess was half-right, but on one key point, he was off the mark.

His instincts were still being clouded by one thing: the idea that Dallas had snatched Ennis. In his mind, he believed this blindly.

As Firo and Christopher continued the conversation on their own, Adele looked down, unable to say anything more.

“What’s the matter? Did something happen with that Ronny fellow?”

Chi had been silent up until then, but when he spoke, Adele whispered in a voice only he could hear, almost as if she were talking to herself.

“...He was...alien... More than anyone I’ve ever met... I mean...um... *Even more than Master Huey...*”

“...That’s ridiculous.”

Chi snorted, but Adele had a firm belief in her own words and actions.

“That man, Ronny... He...probably...”

Remembering the atmosphere that had filled the mansion the moment that man arrived, she shivered quietly, in both body and soul.

“...isn’t...human...”



The Empire State Building

“This is a strange trend.”

As he gazed out the window, Ronny was tapping his temple with his index finger again.

With each tap, the expression of the upper-level Martillo Family executive changed.

“Now then...*how far should I involve myself in this?*”

“?”

Ennis tilted her head, puzzled; she didn’t understand what Ronny was saying.

“Um...Ronny? What are we going to do now?”

“What is there to do? If you don’t want to go along with Isaac and Miria’s plan, I’d suggest hurrying home and reassuring Firo.”

“Oh, but...”

Ennis looked at the guests’ sofa behind her.

Isaac and Miria had worn themselves out dancing and were sitting there, leaning against each other, snoozing peacefully.

She’d gone to bring them back, but they were keeping her away instead. On the one hand, Ennis wanted to help Isaac and Miria, but on the other, she was starting to feel very guilty toward Firo.

However... More than that, she was caught by the premonition that, if she went back to Firo now, something important would slip away from her.

“I don’t know what I should do... Too much has happened today...”

“It’s bothering you, isn’t it? What that woman said this afternoon. You’re confused by the fact that Szilard’s name came up—is that it?”

“...”

He’d accurately stated what was in her heart. Ennis looked down slightly.

“...Yes.”

“Szilard’s curses remain all over this country—no, all over the world. It would probably be faster to acquire the strength to confront them than it would be to get away from them completely.”

“...?”

Ronny spoke as if he understood everything, and it bewildered Ennis even more.

Why does Ronny know about Master Szilard? Did Maiza tell him?

Even as she thought, she realized that, mentally, she was still adding “Master” to Szilard’s name, and she felt more and more conflicted.

Ignoring Ennis’s thoughts, Ronny spoke as if he’d seen right through her.

“...It would be easy for me to tell you who the spear woman and the others are. However, if you’d like to get a satisfactory answer on your own—go to Mist Wall tomorrow.”

“Mist Wall... You mean the white building near us?”

“That’s right. Something will happen there tomorrow, and I expect the spear woman’s group will make an appearance.”

Ronny sounded like a prophet, and Ennis finally couldn’t help but ask.

“Um...Ronny? What on earth...are you?”

Ronny was silent for a moment. Then he spoke, with a smile that seemed to be testing her. “How do you want me to answer that?”

“Huh?”

“Do you want me to say I am some omnipotent being who is not human? Or do you want me to tell you I’m merely human? Or would you rather I said I was something else or told you ‘I am me,’ or would you prefer I didn’t answer at all? No matter what I tell you, whether that answer satisfies you is up to you. In that case, there’s no meaning in my giving an answer at this point.”

Although his words seemed to have some sort of deep meaning, in reality, he was clearly just trying to confuse her.

Ennis wasn’t able to pursue the matter any further.

She felt as if, in learning the truth, she would break something important.

Without waiting for Ennis to answer, Ronny continued gazing quietly at the rain that fell through the darkness.

“...Don’t worry. I *keep myself from knowing* the future. After all, that would make life boring. And so—right now, I’m looking forward to this.”

Saying, however roundabout, that he could know the future if he chose to, he smiled as if he was enjoying the situation that surrounded them.

“Who will be the one to cut this tangled web of threads, in the end? Or will they be entangled and trapped by either Huey or Nebula? ...I’m a bit curious about that.”

In front of Ronny, who wore a small, intimidating smile, the rain continued to pour down indifferently.

The sound of the fierce rain slashed through the night, raging and blustering in the dark.

It was as if it were trying to sink the whole of Manhattan, which was bound by a variety of things, to the bottom of a deep ocean...



FINAL CHAPTER

SLASH

“You kept a rat, didn’t you?”

“You entrusted your heart to that rat, and you built your own world inside it. Isn’t that so?”

“Ha-ha. I told you I’d learned all sorts of things about you, remember? I know everything about you.

“But your world broke far too easily... Or rather, it was killed.

“That rat-vessel was much too fragile to hold it.

“And so—wouldn’t you like to actually create a world?”

“You can simply remake the world to suit yourself.

“If you say you’ll help me... Yes, there’s an idea: I’ll take the place of your rat.

“Tell me of the world you wish for, of all the malice you hold toward this world.

“You could say that the world you desire is inside me.

“After all, I came from the world you seek...”



10:00 AM In front of Mist Wall The Nebula New York branch office In the rain, the monolith that was Mist Wall spread out hazily.

As Tim looked up at that faintly shining whiteness, he was remembering two “worlds.”

One was the white rat he’d kept as a boy.

The other was the man to whom he now devoted his entire being.

Tim had enclosed the world he wished for in both of them. It was safe to say that the man—Huey Laforet—still held it.

When he was a child, all he'd done was long for things and seal them inside others.

Things were different now, though. Now, he had power. The power to take the world he'd sealed inside Huey and pull it out, into reality.

However, his power was far too weak to transform the world completely.

I'll change the world that didn't accept me with my own two hands.

In order to do that, he had to gain the "power" Nebula held.

But he still had a mission to do. Tim quietly clenched his fists.

Just as they'd done yesterday, the members of Larva—himself included—were now standing across the street, observing the building.

"...Christopher's group?"

"I don't see them."

"Tch... Adele... Well, that's all right. They weren't part of my calculations to begin with. Once it's time, we'll just begin the operation on our own."

As he issued that order to his subordinate, Tim was watching the entrance of the skyscraper, Nebula's pride.

Possibly because it was still morning, or maybe due to the ferocious rain, even though the building was as big as it was, almost no one was entering or leaving.

"All according to plan. We have to finish everything while the building isn't getting much traffic."

Tim went on quietly observing, and for a little while, he watched with an easy mind, but...

When about ten minutes had passed, he spotted something that seemed off.

"...?"

One of the cars that cut across the avenue slowed, then stopped at the base of Mist Wall, in front of the entrance.

If it had been an ordinary car, this wouldn't have been a problem, but the black vehicle was clearly different from the other makes and models that drove

around it. It was a luxury car, the sort that seemed to give a physical shape to the assertion that only the elite were allowed to ride in it.

“...A Nebula exec?”

The luxury car that had suddenly appeared concerned Tim, and he watched to see who got out of it.

“I”

When he realized who that individual was, the Larva boss stiffened involuntarily.

“What is it, Tim?” one of his subordinates whispered, sounding worried.

“Uh, no... Nothing.”

Tim’s response was delayed a moment; he drew a deep breath, trying to calm himself down.

That’s crazy. What on earth...? What for?

From under his umbrella, he watched the man enter the building, making sure that it really was who he’d thought it was, that he hadn’t seen wrong.

Once he’d watched the figure disappear through the doors, Tim quietly murmured the name of the big shot.

“—Beriam... Senator Manfred Beriam...”



At the same time Little Italy

In a room that was spacious but plain, reminiscent of a midsize hotel— —a man was speaking to the room’s owner.

“Seriously, thanks for putting us up for the night. As far as I’m concerned, you’ve leveled up from ‘friend’ to ‘good friend’! Boy, are you lucky! Check you out!”

Although there was no telling what was so funny, Christopher cackled away as he opened the front door.

Following suit, Chi and Adele each thanked him in turn:

“I apologize for the inconvenience. I will repay the favor of this night’s lodging someday.”

“Uh, um, um... Thank you very much.”

And then they left the room.

Firo, who’d been left behind, immediately reached for his coat and hat on the wall, intending to follow them.

In the end, Christopher and the others had persuaded him to go to the Nebula building the next day, after which Christopher had pointed out, shamelessly, that they had no place to spend the night.

Firo hadn’t wanted to get the Martillo Family involved with this shady group, so he’d had no choice but to put them up in his own apartment.

He pulled his hat down low on his head, and just as he reached for the umbrella in the entryway, a young voice called from behind him: “Firo.”

It was Czeslaw Meyer, the boy who’d become the apartment’s second rent-free lodger, after Ennis.

“Hey, Czes. Sorry about all the noise last night... Ennis is fine, absolutely, so don’t worry.”

“No, that’s okay, but... Um, about Christopher’s group...”

Czes hesitated, as if this wasn’t easy to say, then murmured in a voice too low for anyone else to overhear, “...I think you should be careful.”

“Yeah, I know. They never did say anything about themselves.”

“No, not that... How should I put this...?”

Firo stopped talking and waited for his inarticulate roommate to state his conclusion.

“...They’re similar. The way they feel...”

“Similar to who?”

“...*To Ennis.*”

At that answer, Firo looked blank for a moment. Then he laughed and set a

hand on Czes's head.

“Ha-ha-ha! C'mon, Czes, there's no way that's true. What about that bunch of wackos is like Ennis?”

“...You're right. I'm sorry; I said something weird.”

“Yeah... Really, don't worry. Let's take Ennis and go out to eat somewhere tonight.”

Giving Czes a confident smile, Firo followed Christopher and the others outside.

On his own, after he watched Firo leave, Czes organized the thoughts he'd had a moment earlier.

“If what I felt was accurate, then, now that Szilard is dead, the person who could pull *something like that* is...”

Remembering a certain man, Czes murmured his name without thinking.

It was the name of a former companion, and as he spoke, he felt a bottomless chill...

“Huey... Huey Laforet...”



Near Mist Wall The parking lot

An empty space, squeezed into the gap between buildings.

It was too cramped to call a “parking lot,” but even so, it was crowded with private automobiles in the latest models.

Jacuzzi's group was disorderly assembled there, scattered among the cars, and everyone except for Jacuzzi, Nice, and Donny was wearing the same type of white work clothes.

A group of guys in uniforms, under several open umbrellas.

“Is this gonna be okay...?”

With an expression that didn't hide his unease in the slightest, Jacuzzi was remembering the talk he'd had with Tim.

“I’ll say it one more time: We don’t want to be involved with killing.”

Squeezing out an unusually firm voice, Jacuzzi checked the content of the job with Tim.

“I know, I know. Your pals just need to disguise themselves as the building’s janitorial staff and spread this gas around in the places I told you.”

“It... It’s not poison gas, right?”

“If that’s what you think, want me to breathe some for you right here?”

Jacuzzi eyed it suspiciously for a little while, but before long, as if he’d given up on something, he accepted the object. It looked like a hand grenade.

“Wh-what is this? ...Gas that puts people to sleep is going to come out of this thing? That’s just...”

“They’re like the smoke bomb the sister with the eye patch used this afternoon. Our boss makes weird things like that as a hobby.”

“Huh... Is that right.”

“According to the plans we got earlier, there are three labs. They’re supposed to be researching that liquor in one of them. Larva will handle that end of things. All you have to do is spread that knockout gas around and attract the guards’ attention.”

Thumping Jacuzzi on the shoulders, Tim gave a murky smile and murmured: “I expect great things from you...Jacuzzi.”

“I...refuse to acknowledge the sort of people who’d take hostages in order to force other people to act. So—”

Jacuzzi’s words held serious determination, but his companions spoke up lightly, interrupting him.

Because he and Nice would have stood out too much, they weren’t dressed like janitors. Instead, they would wait in the sky-view restaurant on the top floor.

“We know, Jacuzzi. We’re pulling a fast one on ’em, right?”

“That’s what we always do, ain’t it?”

“I don’t really get it, but we’re planning on being the only winners here, yeah?”

“Hya-haah.”

All the usual responses.

The comments did sound dim, but to Jacuzzi, they were the best possible nourishment.

“Yeah... We’re doing it.”

As the young crybaby nodded firmly, a sharp light came into his eyes.

“Once they steal that ‘liquor of immortality’—we’re going to steal it again.”

They didn’t want to cooperate, but they did want a way to stand up to the mafia. They might be able to use the liquor of immortality as a bargaining chip.

Jacuzzi had thought up this theft, the redheaded hitman who’d shown up later had egged them on, and then they’d put the idea into action.

Confronted with this daring plan—robbing the robbers—not one of Jacuzzi’s companions had lost their nerve.

“We...managed to steal cargo from the Flying Pussyfoot. And so...I’m positive this heist is going to go well, too!”

In the midst of the downpour, Jacuzzi’s friends sent up a cheer.

Their voices nearly drowned out the sound of the rain, and they didn’t have the slightest doubt of their victory.

They didn’t know what was waiting for them, within the “mist” that towered in the rain...



Little Italy The restaurant Alveare “Hey, Ennis. Good to see you again.”

“Welcome back, Ennis.”

When Ennis entered the restaurant, several of her friends called to her.

As she was returning each greeting conscientiously, Maiza, who was sitting at the counter, spoke to her as well.

“Hello, Ennis. What happened to Isaac and Miria?”

“Oh, Maiza... Well, you see...”

“Do you want to know the answer?”

If she’d said Ronny’s words last night hadn’t intrigued her, she would have been lying.

For now, however, she’d chosen to reassure Firo.

He may be angry with Isaac and Miria, but I’ll tell him it’s payback for knocking over the dominos and that they’re even now. He’s probably mad at me, too, but...if he is, I’ll just apologize honestly.

In the end, she’d spent the evening with Ronny, Isaac, and Miria at the office, and as soon as she’d awakened, she’d come back to Alveare.

Ronny had said he was going to go settle things with Jacuzzi and his friends. On hearing that, Isaac and Miria had kicked up a fuss—“You’re going to see Jacuzzi and everybody? I’m going, too.” “Me too!”—and they’d followed Ronny, just as if they were going on a picnic.

“I didn’t think Ronny would take them with him...”

Ennis was relieved by the fact that nothing had happened, and Maiza spoke up, explaining Ronny’s behavior to her.

“Oh, that was because...they said they were friends with Jacuzzi’s group, so he probably assumed the discussion would go more smoothly if they were there. Besides...Ronny seems to really like Isaac and Miria.”

“Does he?”

“Yes, although I couldn’t say why.”

Ennis smiled, seeming vaguely relieved. Then she looked around the restaurant, searching for the person she most wanted to see.

“Um...where is Firo?”

“I think he’s still out looking for you. Today was his day off.”

“Huh?”

Brrrrrrring Brrrrrrring Brrrrrrring

Just as feelings of intense guilt began to well up inside Ennis, the telephone rang loudly.

Seina, who was at the counter, picked up the receiver, said a few words into it, then held it out to her.

“Here, Ennis. It’s for you.”

“For me...?”

Could it be Firo?

If it is, I’ll have to apologize right away.

Hastily putting the receiver to her ear, she was on the verge of shouting an apology, when— *“Hiiiiii.”*

The voice she heard was unfamiliar, and it belonged to a woman.

“...Oh, u-um.”

“You’re Ennis, aren’t you? That wasn’t very nice. We waited for you at your place all last night...”

“What?”

“Ennis’s place” was the apartment she shared with Firo and Czes. This woman was saying she’d spent the night there, and in spite of herself, Ennis was flustered.

“U-um! Who on earth are you...?! You were waiting for me...?”

“My, my. I’m sorry. My name is Leeza. It’s a pleasure.”

The voice that giggled stealthily on the other end of the phone struck Ennis as terribly creepy. She fell silent, and as if mocking her, this “Leeza” continued, sounding unconcerned.

“I’ll get straight to the point: We have Firo Prochainezo.”

“...!”

The moment she understood the other woman’s words, Ennis felt a shock run through her.

“But you see, to be honest, we don’t have any use for him yet. Only— There’s someone who desperately wants to say hello to you... And so...I’d be very happy if you’d come, alone, to the place I’m about to tell you.”

“ ...”

“What’s the matter, Ennis?”

Maiza spoke from the counter; he seemed to have picked up on the fact that something was wrong from her expression.

Ennis couldn’t answer. All she could do was wait for the woman’s next words.

Could this be some kind of mistake? Maybe Isaac and Miria’s prank made Firo mad, and now he’s trying to trick me?

Those faint hopes crossed her mind, but the next words dashed them.

“Let’s see... The sky-view restaurant on the top floor of Mist Wall. Let’s meet there.”

Mist Wall.

Ennis immediately remembered the significance of that place.

It was the location Ronny had mentioned yesterday, and according to him, the spear woman would be there as well. The place where she could find the truth.

“Oh, that’s right: You mustn’t be sneaky and bring any friends with you. Such as, for example, the young man with glasses who’s sitting next to you at the counter...”

“...!”

“Can you guess how I managed to phone right after you went into the restaurant?”

“——!”

Realizing what she meant, Ennis looked around in spite of herself. The voice on the other end of the telephone gave a long, musical laugh.

“Do you understand? ‘The twins’ are always watching you... All right. We’ll be waiting.”

“Please don’t go yet! Who on earth...? Who are you?!”

At Ennis’s yell, Leeza fell silent for a moment. Then, mockingly, she responded.

“I’m just Leeza. However...”

When she heard her answer—Ennis’s heart froze completely.

“...the others have inherited the will of Szilard Quates.”



“Geez... Is that bastard Dallas really here?”

He shifted his umbrella back slightly, looking up at the white building for just a moment as the rain fell on his face.

Using his fingers to wipe water out of his eyes, Firo spoke to the trio behind him.

“I dunno. I only heard about it from Adele. What do you think, Chi?”

“Why are you asking me? ...Adele.”

“Huh? Oh... Y-yes. Our companion...is watching him, so...it should be all right, I think...”

Adele’s answer didn’t sound confident, and Firo looked up at the structure again uneasily.

It was hidden in the shadow of the Empire State Building, but even so, Mist Wall’s height was quite striking.

“Where in this place is—?”

“Never mind that. More importantly...”

In sharp contrast to Firo, who was looking tense, Christopher’s expression was easygoing.

“You’re one of those types, aren’t you, Firo? I’m impressed you can walk around in public with us like it was nothing.”

“Hunh?”

Firo’s train of thought had been disrupted. He turned around...and took

another look at the group he was traveling with.

The most decent-looking one was the woman, who was carrying an odd, stick-shaped object on her back.

A slender man whose arms were covered in bandages and who was holding a bright-red, Asian-style umbrella.

And a guy in aristocratic clothes, with red eyes and a jaw that was all fangs.

Considered against the ordinary, they were people you'd absolutely never want to walk around with.

Why am I...?

Part of it was probably the fact that his mind had been fully occupied with Ennis, but Firo suspected something else.

It was because he'd spent nearly three years with the sort of people who'd dress up as Indians or clowns, or even don Japanese kimonos and wander around town with him.

I got used to people who look nutso? ...Me?

It felt as if admitting that would mean taking a step over to "that side of things" himself, and Firo hastily shook his head.

Dammit. Come to think of it...I wonder what Isaac and Miria are doing now.

Even in this hopeless situation, if they'd been here, would he have been able to rest a little easier, mentally?

That was what Firo thought, but in the end, it didn't change the fact that they weren't here.

Argh, dammit to hell. I shouldn't have fought over something that dumb.

Just for a moment, Firo smiled as if he were laughing at himself. Then he folded his umbrella and started into Mist Wall.

"...Don't tell me those guys have been walking around town like that."

On seeing Christopher's group enter the building, Tim held his head briefly.

The entrance of Mist Wall felt like a hotel lobby: The building was a

commercial terminal that brought the various businesses of the Nebula conglomerate together, and in its center, there were easily more than ten elevators, installed in rows. Among those elevators sat a general information center that looked like a department store.

Two women with even features sat behind the information center counter, wearing professional smiles and nodding constantly to the people who were entering or leaving the building.

Immediately beside the information center, there was a waiting area with several tables.

Tim had settled in at a table right on the edge and had been supervising the situation while pretending to read a newspaper, but...

On seeing Adele walking over to him, he was relieved in spite of himself.

If it was Christopher or Chi, I'd have had to pretend I didn't know them.

"U-um...Tim..."

"You're late. Everyone else is already in place. We're about to get started."

Tim was looking at his watch as he spoke, but Adele ignored him and asked an apologetic question instead.

"U-um...where is Dallas...now?"

"? What about him? He's—I told him to keep an eye on Jacuzzi's group in the restaurant on the top floor. Jacuzzi and those other guys might sell us out... He could also be plotting something with them, but it looks like the hostage is still working."

"I see... The restaurant on the top floor, you said."

Murmuring as if in confirmation, Adele turned on her heel and started back to Christopher and the others.

"Hey. Adele?"

His subordinate's inexplicable behavior concerned him, but Tim couldn't do anything conspicuous here, so for the moment, he decided to just keep an eye on the situation.

The group Adele was walking toward consisted of Christopher, Chi, and— “... Who’s that?”

“Um, uh... I found out, Firo. He says Dallas is in the restaurant on the top floor.”

“! The top floor? Thanks.”

No sooner had Firo heard that than he dashed into an elevator whose doors had just opened.

Christopher made no move to follow him. He just saw his “friend” off with a mild expression.

“All right.”

Christopher cracked his neck—and the atmosphere warped slightly.

Noticing this, Chi and Adele quietly narrowed their eyes...and smiled happily.

The red-eyed youth walked right up to the table where Tim, the leader of Larva, was sitting and looked down at him.

For his part, Tim kept his eyes on his newspaper and pretended not to know him.

“Hi there. It looks like you set up another play-it-safe maneuver, huh, Tim?”

“...”

“You’re always like that. You pick up ‘disposable pawns’ near the job site and use the hell out of them, while you work in a safe, key spot... Oh, I get it: Are you ‘Larva’ because you possess people and control ‘em?”

“...Quiet.”

Tim muttered the word in a voice so low he might almost have been talking to himself. His eyes were still skimming his newspaper.

Shrugging gracefully, Christopher shook his head. He seemed entertained.

“You don’t score any big successes, but you almost never fail, either. That steadiness of yours is more intelligence than genius. It’s sort of, well, you know: a pale imitation. Anyway, don’t worry. Since we’re here...we’ll take this smart job and bump it up to genius level.”

Christopher smiled brightly, and Tim finally looked at him.

“...I don’t know what Mr. Huey wants to do here, but there’s nothing for you to help with anymore.”

He’d declared them unnecessary in a cold voice, but Christopher shook his head, looking even more entertained.

“Right... You don’t need to know, Tim. Not about what Huey wants to do.”

“? What do you mean?”

Without answering, Christopher spread both arms wide, turning on his heel.

“All right, welcome to dreamland—but it’s nightmares only. You’ll be lonely. Do your best, Tim. Act responsibly, as our leader. In other words, I’m not taking responsibility for this.”

“?! Hey...”

He didn’t understand what the other guy was getting at, and he stood up, trying to stop him—but it was too late. Christopher had reached the general information center.

“Merry Christmas!”

When the man in the strange clothes offered his greeting, the eyes of a woman at the counter went round.

“U-um... Welcome to Nebula...?”

“Merry Christmas?”

The man had rephrased his statement as a question, and the woman wondered whether there was some sort of event on Broadway.

Keeping her customer service smile in place, she attempted a response, but...

“It’s still two months too early for—”

“Sorry, it’s actually Halloween.”

Shink.

In reality, there was almost no sound.

Yet everyone who saw that sight almost certainly heard it.

That *shink*.

It was her throat.

The *point of the handgun* that Christopher had drawn, unnoticed, was stuck in the woman's throat.

That odd gun, which had a knife fused with its tip, had definitely inflicted a fatal wound on the woman's white neck.

"_____"

The woman at the counter tried to say something, but the words wouldn't come. All she produced was the noise of bubbling blood.

"Yeek..."

The girl beside her was the first one to register the situation, and she opened her mouth to give the loudest scream she could manage, but— —the tip of another gun was shoved into it.

"—Ghah! —AAaagkg..."

The left-hand weapon was stuck into the trachea of the woman on the left, while the right-hand gun was in the mouth of the woman on the right.

Pausing for a moment with both arms stretched out horizontally, Christopher slowly broke into a smile.

On seeing the many fangs in that mouth, the woman on the right, who was still conscious, nearly passed out from fright and pain. Her final sensations were seeing Christopher's right hand pull the trigger, hearing the hammer fall and the gunpowder explode, and then, before her feeling of pain could tell her anything, all her senses went dark.

The gunshot was significantly more muted than an ordinary one. To the people who'd been far away, it probably only seemed as if a firecracker had burst.

However—the people who'd been in the hall just then had seen the atrocity clearly.

The guns left the throat and mouth of the women. Their tips were dripping

with bright-red blood—and having lost their support, the women fell back behind the counter and disappeared from view.

Almost no ordinary members of the public had seen it, but many Nebula employees and security guards had witnessed the act, and after a moment's silence, screams and shouts filled the air.

“What...is he...?”

Tim couldn't process the situation; he was blinking behind his glasses.

As if mocking him, Christopher sang loudly, like a little kid.

“Yes, yes, yes, yes, trick or treat, trick or treat. If you don't give me a treat, I'll slaughter you. ♪ If you give me a treat, I'll slaughter you anyway. ♪”

As if it were a children's tune, Christopher randomly improvised a little ditty.

The security guards tried to draw their guns, but he fired before they managed to do the same, sending dry sounds echoing through the hall.

“Red flowers bloomed. ♪ Let's eat, let's eat, flower-petal treats. ♪”

Punctuating the rhythm of his song, the gunshots inflicted fatal wounds on one guard after another.

“La-la-la, la, la. ♪”

“What...is he doing?”

Tim tried to squeeze his voice out, but his tense muscles wouldn't let him.

A nasty shiver ran down his whole body.

He couldn't think of what he was seeing as reality. The cold sensation of sweat trickling down his back was the only thing keeping him anchored to the real world.

Staff members who didn't have guns started running, trying to flee outdoors.

But the glass doors, which should have been standing open, were now closed and had some sort of sign on the outside.

From the fact that nobody new was coming in, the message on it was probably turning people away.

Even so, if they hit the doors from the inside, they should have been able to break through easily, but— “...Poor wretches.”

A lean shadow ran from the front of the entryway, passing the people who were attempting to escape.

The next moment, the employees’ throats gaped open, and they tumbled over, one after another.

The ones who had fallen had stopped moving, and red blood formed widening puddles on the white, glossy stone floor.

A few people saw this and broke into a run, heading for the doors on the opposite side of the building, but— —silver rings flew, seemingly out of nowhere, and lodged in their heads.

“Leeza...!”

Realizing what the silver discs were, Tim clenched his fists tightly and stared at his surroundings with bloodshot eyes, trying to absorb the current situation.

It had seemed as though everyone in the hall would die, but there were a few survivors, and some people had managed to escape through the doors.

As Tim noticed what these people had in common, question marks appeared in his mind.

—?! *Just the ones who aren’t employees here...?*

Everyone who’d been killed was wearing a Nebula employee badge.

Just as he realized this, Tim noticed he was calm again, and he yelled.

“What... What are you doing, bastaaaaaards?! ”

That scream reverberated in the hall, and when Christopher’s group heard it, they quietly stopped moving.

“‘What’?” Turning his usual kind smile on him, Christopher told him the reason in an unconcerned voice. “It’s work. What else would it be? Part of it is to make things easier for you people. The other part—*is because it’s a direct order from Huey.*”

“Wha...?”

As if she'd seen through Tim's confusion, Adele, who hadn't done anything up until that point, spoke. "Tim, um, you see...Master Huey himself contacted us... through the twins. Us, Lamia, directly. Not Larva... And, um...*he said to kill everyone at Nebula's New York branch office...*"

"Wha—?!"

That's ridiculous! That could never...!

The Huey Tim knew didn't like it when people who didn't need to be involved died. For that reason, even the Lemures' terrorist activities hadn't been indiscriminate, but— When his thoughts had taken him that far, Tim abruptly realized something.

During that massacre, Christopher's group hadn't killed a single person who wasn't on the staff.

Tim made a certain conjecture—and at the same time, the horror of his own guess nauseated him.

"Don't tell me... It can't be, right?"

"Yes, it can, Leader!"

As if he'd read his mind, Christopher spoke, sounding cheerful.

"It's a real honor, isn't it? This building— No, everything involved with Nebula has been selected as a subject for Huey Laforet's experiment!"

Huey Laforet was a man who was meticulously careful to do no harm to anything that was not a subject in one of his experiments—but once something had been set as a guinea pig, he'd use any method, no matter how cruel.

Tim had thought he understood that, but he'd never encountered a "guinea pig" this large before.

"Why...? That's..."

"Remember what I said? You don't need to know what Huey wants to do here, Tim. We don't need to know, either, of course. So I haven't heard a peep about it myself."

"..."

Ignoring Tim, whose blood was running cold, Christopher and the others discussed their next move.

“All right, Adele and I will go kill the cooks and staff in the sky-view restaurant and work our way down, so you start from below, Chi. Leeza, you stay here and pick off the employees who run. That okay?”

Chi and Adele nodded wordlessly, and then they all started off on their separate routes.

Christopher and Adele disappeared into an elevator, while Chi vanished into an emergency stairwell.

Once he'd quietly watched the killers go, Tim took the newspaper he'd been holding and hurled it to the floor.

“I see,” he muttered softly. He wore a defiant smile.

On realizing just what sort of situation he'd wound up in, he'd been shocked, then afraid—but now he was smiling.

“A cursed path, was it? This is the path I chose. I must have known as much going in. Right?”

It was less as if he was defiant and more as if he'd reaffirmed his determination concerning the path he'd chosen.

“...I'll do it. In any case...I threw everything away eight years ago.”

Just then, the hands on Tim's watch reached eleven o'clock.

“...It's time.”

In the offices on every floor, a thin, misty smoke went up.

That mist dissolved into the air right away, but its effects didn't vanish: Everyone who breathed that smoke fell into a deep sleep.

Unaware of the tragedy that had taken place on the first floor, Jacuzzi's companions and the members of Larva had taken their first steps toward their own objectives.

And so: A quiet confusion enveloped Mist Wall.



Top floor The sky-view restaurant Babel A short while earlier...

Mist Wall's biggest draw was its overlook restaurant, which was run directly by Nebula.

The surrounding walls were made almost entirely of glass, and it was a place where visitors could relax and enjoy the sensation of being in a midair garden. It was also an observation platform, and although not as tall as the Empire State Building, it was high enough to have an unbroken view out over Manhattan.

The prices on the menu spanned a wide range, from economical dishes to luxury items, and the restaurant had regular visitors from a variety of social classes.

"Hmm. So the Babel chain is managed directly by Nebula, too... Nebula really does have its fingers in every pie, doesn't it?"

Adjusting her glasses over her eye patch, Nice gazed out at the view as she ate her sandwich.

"I-I'm scared. Come on, let's not sit by the window, okay...?"

Shivering like a puppy, Jacuzzi averted his eyes so he wouldn't see outside.

"I think it's better than being on the roof of a moving train, Jacuzzi."

"I—I was...desperate that time, so..."

"Go on, you eat something too."

"Mrrrgh, yum. Jacuzzi, eat, good."

"I c-can't eat while everyone else is walking a tightrope out there..."

Mumbling and hesitating, Jacuzzi kept his face turned away from the window.

He, Nice, and Donny—who took up two chairs on his own—were seated at a big table meant for six people.

Dallas was sitting a short distance away, scowling and glaring fixedly at a menu.

"It's okay, Jacuzzi. I'm sure it's all going to go just fine!" Nice encouraged.

"Uh-huh..."

He tried a listless nod, but as he did so, he accidentally looked out the window. When Jacuzzi glanced away again, he was on the verge of tears.

As they were having that sort of mechanical conversation, a waiter, who wore a formal expression, came up to them.

Even though Jacuzzi's group looked like thugs, the waiter bowed, just as he would have for any other customer. Then, with a look that seemed slightly apologetic, he spoke: "My sincere apologies. Would it be all right if three guests joined you at your table?"

"Oh, s-sure, we don't mind."

"Really?"

Nice had asked her question in a whisper, and he responded: "I mean, if we say no, they'll get suspicious."

Jacuzzi attempted to greet the newcomers with a smile, and— "Thanks."

On seeing Ronny Schiatto sit down in front of him, he almost passed out with that smile still on his face.

Just barely managing to keep his consciousness grounded in reality, Jacuzzi spoke, looking as if he was about to cry.

"Wh...why? How did you know we were here?!"

"Magic."

That's nuts.

Jacuzzi was about to yell the words, but when he saw the faces that darted in from beside Ronny, he shut his mouth.

"Say, Jacuzzi! Ronny's magic tricks are amazing, aren't they?!"

"Yes, it's a people-finding show!"

At Isaac and Miria's abrupt appearance, Jacuzzi's eyes went round again.

"Isaac! Miria! Wh-wh-wh-why are you here?!"

Gazing at the three startled faces, Ronny spoke, sounding amused.

"All right... I'd appreciate it if you'd hear me out without running away

today...”

At the sight of Isaac and Miria, who were smiling innocently, a certain individual’s fists began trembling.

Why...? Why are they here?!

The couple who’d hit him with a car were chatting happily a mere two tables away. They looked as if they hadn’t experienced a single one of the world’s hardships.

Calm down. Not yet. You don’t have time to kill those guys now.

Just when he was toughing the situation out with an angry expression—someone appeared to collapse his levee.

“Ronny! Isaac and Miria, too... Why?!”

Dallas had heard that voice somewhere before, and on reflex, he looked up.

The individual he saw...was the one who had planted this horrific urge to kill in him. The one who was, as far as Dallas Genoard was concerned, the root of all evil—Firo Prochainezo.

“Fiiiiiiiirooooooooooo!”

Before he knew it, he was screaming.

The vengeful yell seemed to have been wrung from his very soul, and it pulled all eyes in the restaurant to Dallas.

“Dallas...!”

As Firo shouted, Dallas got up from his chair and slowly stalked forward.

“Hey...Greaser... To think you’d come all the way out here to get yourself killed...that’s real impressive.”

“D-Dallas?!”

Jacuzzi was startled, and he hastily looked at Dallas’s face, but when he saw the murder in his eyes, he glanced away again in spite of himself.

With a mass of killing intent bearing down on him, Firo glared back without flinching, and— “Dallas...*where is Ennis?!*”

The commanding shout made the man freeze for a moment.

“...Hunh?”

For a beat, silence flowed between the two.

As everyone in the restaurant watched them, only Isaac gazed into space, as if he was thinking about something—and then he remembered his own objective.

“Aaaah!”

“?! ”

His abrupt yell had broken the silence, and the eyes around him shifted to Isaac.

“Ah-ha-ha! Don’t you worry, Firo! Miria and I rescued your precious Ennis!”

“Yes, we sure did!”

“Huh?”

Isaac’s shout had unsettled Firo, and the couple’s words made him involuntarily dial back his hostility.

“Wha—? Y-you... Really?! ”

Ignoring Dallas, Firo went closer to Isaac and Miria, then looked at Ronny.

Ronny glanced at Firo’s eyes, then murmured, “Hmm, well.”

“You mean it?! Ennis is really okay...?”

Relieved, Firo relaxed.

Dallas had watched the scene from the sidelines, looking confused, but it didn’t take him long to realize he’d been completely ignored. His animosity exploded, and he launched himself off the floor.

“Don’t you go ignoring m—”

In the next moment, the sole of Firo’s shoe connected solidly with Dallas’s knee.

“—Huh?”

Then he lost his balance, Firo grabbed his arm, and—

—in the next moment, Dallas’s body flipped neatly and was pinned to the floor.

Ooooooooooh.

A light stir ran through the restaurant.

Crouching down and restraining his arms, Firo muttered to the man who was groaning below him. He sounded disgusted.

“You’re as weak as ever.”

“...!”

Dallas’s eyes flew open, and he glared at Firo’s leg. There was still murder in those eyes.

Even so, he was completely pinned, and he couldn’t even move his head the way he wanted to.

“All right... You kidnapped Ennis. How are you going to make it up to me?”

Just when it looked as though all the trouble was under control—Ronny’s expression clouded.

“? What is it, Ronny?”

“Not feeling so great?”

“Oh, I see. It’s because Firo was only worried about Ennis.”

“Yes, he’s jealous!”

Ignoring the ruckus Isaac and Miria were making, Ronny quietly strained his ears. Before long, he lightly tapped his temple with his index finger.

Then he frowned abruptly, murmuring softly to Firo and the others.

“This is bad. I didn’t think they’d go this far.”

“? What is it, Ronny?”

“Wh-what? What’s going on?”

In response to Firo’s and Jacuzzi’s respective questions, Ronny closed his eyes and spoke.

“...I heard gunshots from the first floor.”

“? From the first floor? Ronny, this is the top floor. You can’t have heard...”

Ronny had specifically said “the first floor,” not “from the direction of the first floor,” and Firo called him out on it, but there wasn’t a trace of uncertainty in his mentor’s expression.

“It isn’t a battlefield yet, but...this building...has become a killing field.”

His tone was serious, but inwardly, Ronny was enjoying the situation.

Now then...the players are very nearly all in place.



The Mist Wall entrance

“What do you think, Mariaaa?”

“Hmm. It stinks of risky business in there, amigo! There are tons of people on the floor!”

Maria peered in through the closed glass doors, reporting what she saw to the group behind her.

Tick stood there, along with Vino, Chané, Fang, and Eve.

“He was saying something about knockout gas, so they’re probably just asleep,” Claire hedged.

“Still, to think they’d do it that openly...,” Fang muttered. “This looks hairier than I thought it would be. Eve, we should probably wait outside.”

“But...”

For a moment, Eve seemed bewildered.

She’d been told that her brother Dallas was here, inside Mist Wall.

The brother she’d been searching for after all this time was inside this building, and something was clearly happening in there. In that case, she wasn’t sure she could wait somewhere safe on her own.

“Nah, just wait. If you say you’re going in, the cook’s probably going to go with you. Even if you’re fine with it, you don’t want to put him in danger,

right?”

Vino’s words convinced Eve, and although she did feel some lingering regret, she nodded.

“Um...please...take care of my brother.”

“Well, I’ll guarantee his life for you, at least. And actually, they say he’s immortal, so I doubt you’ve got anything to worry about.”

On that note, Vino started for the building’s entrance.

Eve and Fang decided to wait beside the building across the way, under their umbrellas. As the girl turned around, Maria spoke to her back, smiling.

“Sorry about last night.”

“Huh?”

Eve had already almost forgotten she’d been taken hostage, and she wasn’t sure how to respond. She gave a timid nod.

“You didn’t cry once yesterday. I bet you’re going to be strong and gorgeous, amiga.”

At those brisk, pleasant words, Eve blushed.

“No, that’s... I mean... It was because I believed...”

“Believed what, amiga?”

“I thought, if you were Mr. Luck’s friend, you must have some sort of reason...”

Eve was smiling gently. Maria saw it, and her response sounded mildly appalled.

“You’re too much of a pushover, amiga. If you keep that up, you’re sure to get burned someday.”

She’d meant the words as sarcasm, but Eve accepted them at face value.

“Yes, I think you’re right... But even so, I don’t mind.”

“...You really are going to be strong, amiga.”

Maria secretly envied the intense light in the girl’s eyes.

I wonder if I was like that, too, when I was a kid...

What would her past self say if she saw her current self, the one who was still wavering?

With a slightly masochistic smile, Maria reaffirmed her resolution to reclaim herself.

Even if it means the spear woman and I take each other out...?

Possibly because she'd picked up on her attitude, Eve hastily added, "U-um... give it your best, please!"

Eve didn't really know what she'd told Maria to "give her best" at. Nevertheless, she'd overheard Tick and Maria's conversation yesterday, and she'd felt as if she needed to tell her something, too. Those were the words that had slipped out automatically.

"I-I'm sorry... It's just that, a moment ago, you looked as if you were really brooding, Maria..."

An outsider had cheered her on, telling her to "give it her best." Depending on the situation, some people might have been angered by that, but Maria accepted the words with good grace, waving a hand and beaming.

She's right. If we take each other out, there's no point.

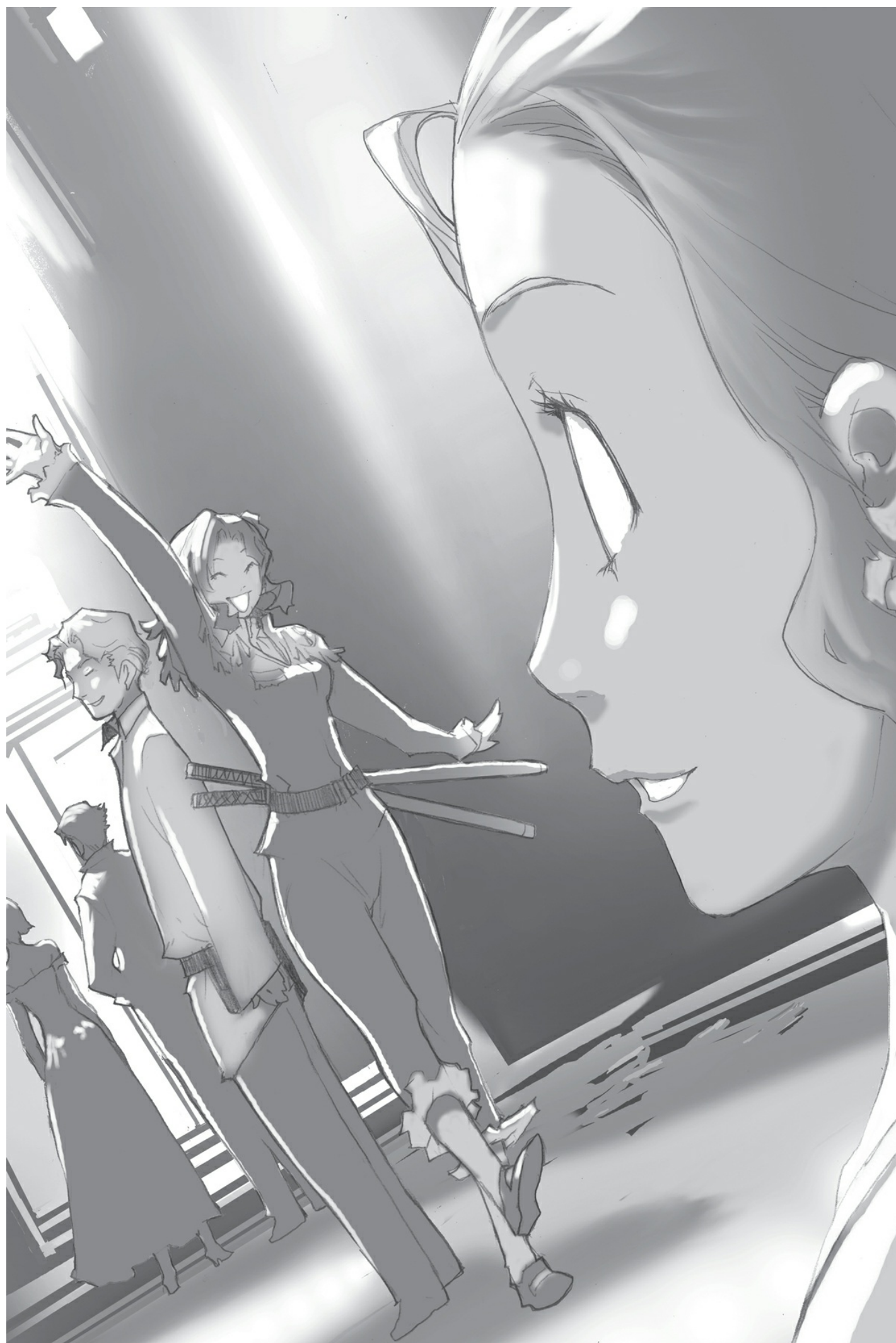
Should she live, or should she risk her life...? Maria had been wavering on top of those scales, but Eve's casual comment had given her a push, and she'd decided to come back alive, no matter what.

And I took this girl hostage. I'll have to make it up to her properly.

Now that she'd decided to survive, her smile had its usual innocent sparkle.

That smile had nearly been lost once. In this town, as the rain poured down, Eve felt as if she'd seen the sun for the first time in ages...and she smiled involuntarily.

"How pretty..."



At the entrance to the building, there was a sign that read EMERGENCY SAFETY EQUIPMENT INSPECTION IN PROGRESS. DO NOT ENTER, and all the doors were locked.

“Want me to cut through those and get us in, amigo?”

Looking at Maria, who was holding her Japanese swords at the ready, Vino muttered, sounding disgusted, “Good grief. Do you want to make this brouhaha bigger or something? For a hitman, you’re pretty gutsy.”

“...Then what do we do?”

Maria puffed her cheeks out sulkily, and Vino reached over and plucked a hairpin from her abundant locks.

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing, amigo?!”

Ignoring her protest, Vino stuck the end of the hairpin into the keyhole on a door.

“Wow, Claire, you can do that, toooo?”

“It’s Felix. Yeah, well, checkered past, etcetera.”

He twiddled the hairpin skillfully, and just as the lock was about to open— — Vino saw a figure approaching in the glass.

The shape wasn’t inside the building. It was part of the reflected scenery from outside. In other words, it was coming up behind them.

Perceiving the unusual aura the figure radiated, Vino slowly turned around.

He saw a lone young woman, without an umbrella, as wet as a drowned rat. She wore a black suit, and Vino didn’t recognize her. Although, after a moment, the other three remembered they’d seen her at Jacuzzi’s (Eve’s) house the day before.

“...”

As if she didn’t even see Tick’s group, the young woman in the suit walked to the next door over. When she discovered it was locked, she took a big step back.

And then—

—she jumped, spinning as if she were turning her back, focused all that momentum into her leg, and slammed an aerial spin kick into the doorframe.

Impact.

The collision was so violent that it seemed to shake the whole building.

Something snapped noisily, and then one of the doors warped and came loose, outer frame and all, and fell into the building.

The woman in the suit went inside, glanced at the people lying around her, and stopped for a moment as if she wasn't sure of something. Then, possibly because what she wanted wasn't there, she briskly made for the elevators in the center.

Click

As they watched her go, there was a soft noise by VINO's fingertips, and the lock opened.

"Wow. Destroyed. She gummed me up."

Still smiling, VINO straightened up, set a hand on the door—which was the type that opened outward—and, for some reason, pushed it in.

Krik creak grunch

There was the sound of something slowly tearing apart, and gradually, the door *bent inward*, in a direction it really shouldn't have opened.

"That helped a bit. I'm not letting her get away with that, though. I'm lodging an emphatic complaint with that broad!"

"Calm down!! That's way too immature, amigo!!"

"Bull. The line between adults and kids is practically nonexistent. In other words, as far as I'm concerned, there's no such word as *immature*."

VINO was wearing an odd expression—an angry smile—but Chané blocked his way, gazing at him steadily with golden eyes.

After a moment, VINO spoke, smiling bashfully. "Well, uh...Chané, if you're going to say all that, then..."

"She didn't say anything."

“But listen, Chané, if you say stuff like that in public, you’ll make me blush. Ha-ha-ha-ha.”

“...Right now, to the average bystander, you look like a complete moron, amigo.”

Maria gazed at Vino as if she was seeing something pathetic. However, when she glanced at Chané’s face, she saw that the girl had averted her eyes rather self-consciously.

“Claire and Chané, you’re all lovey-doveyyy.”

“Knock it off, Tick! And it’s Felix.”

As she watched Vino blush and thump Tick on the back, Maria, sounding mildly amazed, muttered to herself, “...How did I lose to a guy like that?”



The sky-view restaurant

“Ladies and gentlemen...do you like Nature?”

Those were the first words from the man who’d stepped out of the elevator.

“Observation decks are great. There’s nothing but sky all around you. Nothing but Nature for three hundred sixty degree... Whoops, hey, there’s the Empire State Building. It’s ruined. Gimme back my money. Gimme back my Nature. Don’t you agree?”

The odd red-eyed man had abruptly begun saying nonsensical things. A woman who was carrying a strange stick on her back waited behind him, silently watching his movements.

The restaurant’s customers seemed to think this was some sort of show: Although they were paying attention, nobody had started making a fuss about it yet.

“That guy...”

Firo, who was still holding Dallas down, glared at Christopher, sour-faced.

I’ll just pretend I don’t know him.

The moment he’d made that decision, with truly awful timing, the other guy

noticed him.

“Hi, Firo! Did you find that Dallas fella?”

Christopher spoke to him companionably. The diners’ attention, which had left Firo once, came back to him again.

“...”

Beside Firo, whose face had gone bright red, Isaac and Miria were whispering to each other.

“H-hey, Miria! It’s the magician! The doll in back is the magician from yesterday!”

“You’re right! That’s amazing! If we’re running into her here, that must mean the magic show’s already started!”

“I bet the guy who’s sort of dressed like a magician is the doll’s teacher!”

“Wooooow!”

In contrast to Isaac and Miria, who were getting excited all by themselves, Jacuzzi’s group was looking back and forth from Adele to Christopher as if they were seeing something eerie, while Dallas, still pinned to the floor, was glaring at Adele with more murder in his eyes than he’d focused on Firo.

Only Ronny wore his usual expression, as if this had nothing to do with him.

Maybe because he’d grown unable to stand the silence, Firo managed to speak, although he sounded uncomfortable.

“Listen, seriously, why did you come to this town?”

Instead of answering that question, Christopher nodded quietly, then turned to face the staff room, which was behind him.

“By the way, who’s the manager here?!”

At his question, all the staff members in the restaurant looked at one another. Before long, a middle-aged man in the kitchen raised his hand.

“That’s me.”

After making sure there was a small Nebula employee ID on the gentleman’s

chest— —without even giving the man time to be startled, Christopher drew a knife-gun from his jacket and fired.

“——!”

The bullet struck him squarely in the head, and the manager collapsed in the kitchen.

And then—this time, screams and confusion enveloped the sky-view restaurant.

“What...? Hey. What are you doing?”

Firo was gazing at the sight that had unfolded in front of him as if he couldn't believe it.

But the restaurant was in an uproar, and his murmur was completely lost in the noise.

In the midst of this abrupt, abnormal situation, one person moved faster than anybody else.

“Donny!”

Even as Jacuzzi shouted, Donny picked up the table in front of him with one hand and—as lightly as if it were an empty box, but with lethal force—lobbed it at Christopher.

“Whoops.”

Christopher dodged that table without moving his feet.

As if doing a gymnastics bridge, he leaned way over backward, bending his body almost ninety degrees.

An enormous mass flew past the tip of his nose, which was now parallel with the ground.

“Close, but no cigar... Whoa.”

When he righted himself, a giant was standing in his way.

Donny had closed in as he threw the table, and he grabbed Christopher's arm, the one that held the gun.

“Donny! That’s it; hold him down!”

“Mrrrgh...”

Doing as Jacuzzi bade, Donny tried to pin Christopher, throwing all his weight into it, but— “That’s some fantastic strength. You made me shiver a bit.”

Christopher checked Donny’s right hand with his own free left, then began to push at the other man, as if boosting him up from below.

“Mrrgh... Jacuzzi... This guy...strong...”

“It can’t be... Is he trying to match Donny’s strength?!”

As Nice cried out in astonishment, Christopher smirked and abruptly shifted his weight.

“You really think I’d try to match the strength of a big lug like this?”

Vigorously shaking his trapped right hand free, Christopher slipped through Donny’s legs and got around behind him.

“Bye-bye, Gulliver.”

Smiling mischievously, Christopher trained his gun on the back of Donny’s head.

A black lump materialized right in front of his eyes.

Nice had thrown a flash bomb.

“?”

The next instant, the object burst, and a dazzling light blinded Christopher.

“!”

Grabbing that chance, a new shape leaped at the man. Jacuzzi had launched himself off the floor, intending to take the guy’s gun away.

However...

“——!”

...when he was just a step away from touching the gun, Jacuzzi stopped.

A sharp, gleaming, cross-shaped spearhead was pointed at his throat. There

was no telling when she'd equipped it, but Adele stood there, long spear at the ready.

"Um, I, I'm sorry. Jacuzzi... This man is, um... He's an ally..."

Adele's murmur sounded apologetic, and Jacuzzi retorted with anger in his eyes. "You promised we wouldn't kill people!"

Adele looked down, troubled—

"That's, um, I'm sorry, I'm really sorry..."

—and then she gave a conflicted *smile*.

"But, you know...I wasn't the one who made that promise!"

Adele was smiling brightly, and the sight of her face froze Jacuzzi's spine.

No.

This Adele lady... She's something much, much creepier than that Tim guy—

When he'd gotten that far, his thoughts broke off.

He felt something sharp and cold touch his temple.

"Jacuzzi!"

Nice's cry was almost a scream.

When he glanced to the side, moving only his eyes—he saw a strangely shaped knife, fixed to the barrel of a gun.

"Not bad, guys. It's a waste to let Tim use you as throwaway pawns. I mean it."

Christopher had a kind smile on his face, but his finger was already on the trigger.

In this situation, any small jolt would result in a gunshot, and the guests, who had been screaming, all fell silent at once. Some averted their eyes, while others stared, unable to look away.

"Stop it."

Firo, who was still restraining Dallas, had been the one to speak.

Blood. Blood. Blood. Blood. Blood. Blood. Blood. Blood. Blood. Blood. Bloodblood
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oodbloodbloodbloodbloodbloodbloodbloodbloodbloodbloodbloodbloodbloodb
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bloodblood It was a true hell, colored with nothing but blood.

Before anyone had time to scream, before they even noticed, new mouths gaped in their throats.

Just before those who saw it understood the situation, hell yawned in their throats as well.

That hell was being generated by the utmost sharpness, speed, and cruelty.

“I heard there were twelve hundred employees here... Five hundred each, huh? That’s going to take some doing.”

Grumbling, Chi left an office.

“It would be faster to just demolish the building... But then nontargets would get pulled in as well.”

The office behind him had been as white as mist but was now dyed bright red.

It hadn't even been a full thirty seconds since Chi had entered the room. In that brief span of time, he'd slit the throats of the several dozen Nebula employees who were inside.

“...Distinguishing between targets and nontargets is more work than the actual killing. It would be better if we could just rebel like the Lemures, but... Hmm?”

Chi, who'd been muttering to himself, abruptly noticed shapes writhing ahead of him.

The shapes were two men crawling along the floor on their bellies, and they were wearing the uniforms of the building's janitorial staff.

“...Hey, Nick,” said one, “there’s somebody walking up there.”

“What? Does that mean the gas hasn’t gotten this far? Well then, let’s get up.”

When he heard what the prone figures were saying, Chi realized who they were.

Are these the “sacrificial pawns” Adele mentioned?

As Chi quietly narrowed his eyes, Jacuzzi’s friends—Jack and Nick—got to their feet.

“Phew. So, sure, we’re fine if we stay low, but that’s still pretty rough.”

“By the way, you don’t look like an employee... Are you the reinforcements Tim was talking about?”

Poor wretches. They don’t even know that, after they’ve been given the “failed” liquor, they’re fated to be used up as guinea pigs.

Wouldn’t they be better off if he killed them here?

On that thought, Chi licked the iron claws that were affixed to his arms— — and then he noticed that something felt off.

“...?”

“Hmm? What’s wrong, Mr. China?”

“Maybe he doesn’t speak the language?”

Chi ignored the pair, who were peering at him and looking worried. The theory coming together inside his mind terrified him, and he immediately turned around to see whether it was true.

“Uh, hey!”

“What’s up?”

Leaving the two guys in work clothes behind, Chi ran back the way he’d come at full speed.

If...if I’m right about this—!

Several minutes later...

He was sprinting as fast as he could up the emergency stairwell to the top floor.

“What have I done...?! Did I savor the pleasure of killing too much?!”

Angrily admonishing himself, Chi leaped up the stairs at an extraordinary pace.

“Did he know...? Did Master Huey know about this?!”

For some reason, Chi avoided the elevators and continued to run up the stairs.

Somehow, he was traveling just as fast as an elevator.

When he was more than halfway up, his legs tangled, and he fell to his knees. As if that had been the trigger, he looked up toward the roof and screamed loudly.

“...*Run for it...* Christopher, run!”



Tim was walking through a research wing near the top floor.

At the “go” sign, the members of Larva had destroyed the telephone circuits, cutting off all contact with the outside. On top of that, the gas Jacuzzi’s group had spread around should have almost entirely knocked out the functions of the important divisions.

No, if you add what Christopher’s group is doing, it’s probably safe to assume this building is completely done for.

However, Tim wasn’t thinking about that anymore.

He didn’t know what Huey was thinking, but he was here to do his job, nothing more.

On that understanding, he’d decided to carry out his own duties.

“It wasn’t in the other two labs, which means this is the only place left...”

When he reached the lab entrance, two of his Larva henchmen were at the door. They seemed to be struggling to jimmy the lock.

“...What’s the matter?”

“Oh, Tim... Sorry. It’s taking a bit of work... This place is locked up pretty tight.”

“I see. So it is in here, then?”

According to the report from the twins, their information source, this was the likeliest laboratory. The research wing was active during times that were clearly different from the other businesses: It wasn't used at all during the day, and the lights came on only at night.

Still...in that case, the security's too thin. Even if there's trouble elsewhere, I figured they'd leave one or two people here...

Before long, the lock came open, and Tim's two underlings carefully went in.

As they'd been told, there was nobody inside, and he thought they'd be able to relax and rifle through the research materials, but— “Nothing? That's insane...”

All that was in the lab were a variety of machines used in experiments. The products of those machines were nowhere to be seen, and there were no research materials anywhere.

“Did they move them somewhere? ...But the twins confirmed they were in this room three days ago. If they moved them between then and now... Did they know about our attack?”

Several conjectures crossed his mind, but none of them changed the fact that nothing was here.

“Should we ask a researcher directly? I'd rather not show them our faces, but... Well, I guess Christopher's group will get rid of the witnesses.”

“Let me give you a word of advice to keep you from wasting your strength.”

The voice had addressed them suddenly, and Tim and the others ducked behind desks, then turned to look back.

“What you want isn't in this building. The information you acquired was all a bluff directed at Huey Laforet.”

The man who stood there looked about halfway between youth and middle age—and Tim knew his face.

There were two men in black behind him who seemed to be bodyguards.

“Senator...Beriam? Wh...why are you here?”

“The top management of Nebula and I go way back. I’ve been providing a little support for the research in this laboratory as well. Besides—I wanted to get a look at Huey Laforet’s hand-raised protégé. I invited the branch manager as well, but he’s a timid sort, and he’s been away on leave since yesterday.”

“Uh, thanks... Well, that speeds things up, anyway. Tell us where the ‘failed’ stuff is, would you? If you’re funding the research, you must at least know where they put it, right?”

The big shot had appeared out of nowhere, and he pierced Tim with eyes that seemed to see through everything. But Tim bluffed right back, undaunted.

Bluffing’s all I’ve got, huh? Dammit, if Adele were here...

Tim had no personal combat power, and all he had to rely on was the handgun in his jacket. He felt very uneasy about whether it would be effective against the brawny bodyguards in front of him.

“I already told you. There’s no ‘failed’ liquor here anymore.”

“Do you think we’d believe that?”

“You have the wrong idea about the laboratory.”

“...?”

At that abrupt statement, Tim sent a dubious look at Beriam.

“Did you think this tiny room was the lab? Even though we are researching a powerful, abominable thing like immortality?”

“...What are you getting at?”

Up to that point, Beriam’s face had been expressionless, but on hearing Tim’s words, it warped in what looked like self-mockery.

“Put briefly...this building, Mist Wall itself, is a gigantic experimental facility.”



The sky-view restaurant Babel “...You knew?”

“Knew what?”

“Did you know about me from the start?”

Firo's question sounded extremely irritated, and Christopher shook his head, sighing: "No, no, no. The beginning was all a coincidence! When I met you, soaking wet in the rain, I never dreamed you were—you know. Is it a bad idea to say more in front of ordinary folks? I'll be careful. You are the first friend I made here in New York, after all."

"Quit talking crap."

Almost none of the diners around them had heard Christopher's joking reply. A few of the calmer ones had probably heard the words, but it wasn't likely they'd understood much of what was actually being said.

Dammit. They even know I'm immortal...?

Just as Firo was about to ask another question in an attempt to suss out the other guy's identity— *...Ding...*

—a single cool, bell-like tone sounded, notifying the surrounding people that an elevator had arrived at the top floor.

"...? Who's that?"

Because the restaurant covered the entire top floor, there was no entrance. It was designed so that, beside the cash register, there were three elevators that traveled directly to and from the first floor.

Curiously, Christopher approached the elevator whose meter indicated the top floor and waited for the doors to open.

However...when they did slowly open, no one was behind them.

"What's this about? ...Maybe Tim or somebody hit the button by mistake?"

He sauntered closer to check the interior—and then, abruptly, feet sprouted from the ceiling and connected solidly with his face.

"Bugwuh!"

Christopher flew backward.

"Christopher!"

The suddenness of the situation had startled Adele, too; she retracted the spear she'd been pointing at Jacuzzi and ran over to her boss, who was lying on

his back.

On seeing the thug collapsed on the floor, the restaurant customers fell over each other in their haste to get to the emergency stairwell, and a mild panic ensued.

Walking right past that crowd, Ennis—the owner of the legs that had appeared from the elevator—looked around the restaurant as if searching for something.

On seeing her, the person she was looking for had a marked reaction as well: “Ennis!”

Responding to Firo’s shout, Ennis ran to her “main body.”

“Oh, good... I’m so glad you’re safe!”

Ignoring the pair, who were overjoyed by their reunion, most of the people disappeared down the emergency stairwell.

The restaurant’s population density had thinned out dramatically. There weren’t many people left, but naturally, Jacuzzi, Firo, and the rest were all present.

“Yeow-ow-ow-ow-ow-owch.”

An incredibly laid-back scream echoed in the empty space.

“Ooh, that hurt. That was mean. Even my parents never kicked me in the face.”

In contrast to what he was saying, Christopher didn’t seem fazed at all. He got up, speaking cheerfully to Ennis, who was nestled close to Firo.

“Well, it’s not like I actually have parents.”

Brushing the dust off his clothes, he smiled at her as if he were talking to a friend.

“Since I’m like you and all.”

At those words, Ennis flinched. Firo felt it, and looking grim, he started to grill Christopher again.

“Look... What are you? You’d better give me a serious answer this time.”

“I am always serious... Well, never mind. I’ve gotten to meet my cute ‘little sister,’ so maybe I will tell you the truth.”

“...Little sis...ter?”

At Firo’s mutter, Christopher began to relate the “truth” Ennis had wanted to know. He was still wearing that kind smile, a trademark of his by now.

“We were made based on Szilard’s research into the process of creating homunculi. We are...failed homunculi.”

“ ...”

Firo and Ennis listened quietly to what Christopher was saying, while Jacuzzi’s group glanced back and forth between them, looking as if they had no idea what was going on. Ronny stayed in his chair, his expression calm. At some point, Isaac and Miria had disappeared.

“As ‘one who knows all,’ Ennis was utterly flawed, but even so, she managed to be both undying and unaging. The thing is, though...we were manufactured based on research that was *stolen* before that stage, so we’re just unaging. Although, in exchange, we don’t have to worry about having our lives managed by a ‘main body’ the way Ennis does.”

Faced with this fact, which had been stated indifferently, Firo murmured something he’d been wondering about. His expression was still serious.

“Stolen? Meaning...Szilard wasn’t the one who created you?”

“Ah... ‘Created.’ Treating artificial life-forms like us as if we were proper humans... What a nice thing to say. You really are my friend, Firo.”

“Answer the question.”

“...If you’ve got Szilard’s memories, you probably have a pretty good idea already, no?”

At that, Firo began to rifle through the area Szilard occupied in his mind.

To be honest, he didn’t even want to touch those corridors of memory, but the other guy’s words had pulled him in, and his mind had automatically begun searching for that image—and before long, it pointed him to the name of a certain individual.

“Huey... Huey Laforet...”

...*Ding*...

Just as Firo said that name, an elevator bell rang again.

“Oh, for crying out loud. We were just getting to the good part. Who is it?”

Christopher muttered, sounding bored, and picked up a few unused knives from a nearby table.

“Well, it doesn’t matter who.”

“Hey... What are you...?”

Before Firo could stop him—Christopher threw the knives he’d picked up.

Right at the elevator doors, which were just beginning to open— “Stop!”

Even as Firo yelled, the doors opened, and three knives disappeared inside.

He didn’t hear them hit the walls or the floor.

Thinking about what that meant, Firo felt a light sweat break out on his back.

However: What emerged from that elevator was something that far surpassed Firo’s imagination.

“That’s not safe.”



An unconcerned voice spoke, and a lone man stepped from the elevator onto the expensive carpet.

There were three knives in his hands, and as he took a step forward, he was juggling them lightly. A young woman in a black dress, a Mexican girl with Japanese swords, and a man with threadlike eyes and scissors at his waist appeared from behind him.

“Did they put a dartboard on the elevator doors or something? If so, I want to congratulate the manager on his thrilling experiment. How about it?”

Entertaining thoughts that made no sense and ignoring the question of who’d thrown the knives, the guy who’d caught those knives with no trouble broke off his juggling.

“Claire...?”

At first, Firo doubted his eyes, but he recognized the young redhead, and in spite of himself, he gave a faint cry.

“Claire... Hey, Claire, it’s actually you?!”

“Whoa, if it ain’t Firo. Man, you’re as baby-faced as ever.”

“Ha-ha! Come on, it’s been years; that’s really cold!”

On seeing Firo’s attitude in this exchange, Ennis, who was standing beside him, looked mildly startled.

Firo’s boyish face bothered him, and she knew that, when a hoodlum had taunted him with the name “Baby Face” at the casino, he’d broken all the guy’s fingers. As a result, she was having a hard time believing his current behavior.

“Oh, that’s right. Sadly, Firo, Claire’s dead. Call me Felix Walken.”

“Luck told me about that. I seriously don’t get you, guy.”

There was no telling where his tension up until a moment ago had gone. Firo’s expression had completely reverted to a smile.

Christopher, on the other hand, had totally lost control of the conversation. Looking cross for the first time, he demanded, “What are you, and how in blazes did you get into this buildi—?”

“Ha-ha-ha. Yes, okay, got it. So shut up.”

That peremptory remark seemed to stun even Christopher, and he shut his mouth.

Smiling at Firo, Vino turned to look at Jacuzzi, who was standing dumbfounded beside him.

“By the way...from the looks of things, something dicey is going down, right?”

Coming back to himself at the sound of that voice, Jacuzzi hastily answered, “Th-that’s... We have no idea what’s...”

“For starters, from the looks of the crowd napping in the first-floor hall, is it okay to assume the knockout gas maneuver worked?”

Picking up on something intensely wrong in those offhanded words, Adele and Christopher glanced at each other involuntarily.

Then, laughing, Christopher tried to correct Vino.

“Ha-ha, napping? You’re a comedian, fella. You saw all that blood and thought ‘asleep’...?”

Ooooooooooooooooooh!

Christopher’s words were drowned out by a cheer from a male and female voice in sync.

“Wow! The power of magic tricks really is phenomenal!”

“Yes, it’s a miracle wonder show!”

“?”

Everyone in the restaurant looked in the direction of the voices. There was no telling when they’d gotten in there, but Isaac and Miria were in the kitchen, shouting and applauding loudly.

“What are they doing?”

Firo strained his eyes. Isaac and Miria were sitting on either side of the manager, who’d received a bullet to the head from Christopher a little while ago.

And the next moment—he saw it.

It wasn't just Firo. Everybody in the restaurant witnessed that miracle.

“Uh... What on earth...just...?”

The moment when the once-dead man groaned and muttered those words.

The manager, who had been plugged right in the head, sat up, uninjured, without a single drop of blood on him.

“?!”

“...!”

“?”

Firo and the others were astounded, Christopher and Adele registered a certain possibility, and the people who didn't know the manager had been shot looked perplexed.

“It can't be...”

As that possibility crossed his mind, Christopher's eyes went to his weapon.

“——!”

The tip of the knife-gun was the blade that had pierced the information girl's throat.

He'd shaken the blood off—but even taking that into account, *the blade shone too brightly*.

Just as he realized this, a familiar voice echoed from the emergency stairwell.

“Christopher!”

“Chi...”

Chi was supposed to have been traveling a path of carnage up from below, but there wasn't a single drop of blood on his blades, either.

“Christopher! Not good... *This building is bad news!* We're pulling out!”

Not caring that outsiders would overhear, Chi shouted an important fact.

“The employees in this building— The Nebula staff—”

“—they’re all immortals!”



“Impossible...”

As Tim muttered, he felt a violent nausea working its way up from deep inside him.

“That can’t be...”

“But it is a fact. I was against it, but there’s a deranged female scientist at the Nebula head office.”

“The problem isn’t who proposed it... You know that’s not the problem...”

The reality that confronted Tim was far too hideous, and his nerves were enveloped in a violent confusion.

“That far...? You people went that far...?”

He wanted to believe it was a lie, something meant to disorient him, but he couldn’t think of a reason for telling a lie like that under circumstances like these. And more than anything, Beriam’s eyes were clearly those of a man who was telling the truth.

“You’re telling me you took twelve hundred employees...and turned them all into failed immortals?!”

“That’s right. We said it was a vaccine: The failed liquor we took from Szilard’s organization.”

Beriam stated the facts, sounding unconcerned, and Tim hit him with a look of ferocious disgust. Behind him, his two underlings were also overawed by what Beriam was saying. Their faces had gone pale.

“For the sake of your ‘research,’ you turned twelve hundred people into monsters?”

“When they reach the end of their natural lives, they’ll die—so they’re still human. Barely. Besides, while there is a difference in numbers, you are attempting to do the same thing for Huey’s sake, aren’t you?”

Beriam’s words were endlessly dispassionate and infinitely cold-blooded, and

Tim wasn't able to argue with them.

"However...I think Huey may have been aware of this. I imagine that's why he's letting that strange crew run amok... Although you don't seem to have been informed."

His smile, which had been a bit self-deprecating up until then, changed into unmistakable pity for Tim.

"Did you think it was coincidence?"

"Huh?"

"The fact that I came here today."

Abruptly, Beriam looked away from Tim, continuing as if he were talking to himself.

"What I mean is that, behind what you mistook for coincidences or miracles, some sort of calculations were always at work. I don't just mean today. That earlier Szilard Quates incident, and the affair on the Flying Pussyfoot..."

"..."

"You and your people are like butterflies. Hapless butterflies who have gotten dragged in by accident, as Nebula and Huey cast threads, trying to entangle each other. No one will prey on you. You'll simply be immobilized and starve to death... Now then, I'll take my leave. If I don't, I'll be late for this afternoon's assembly."

After delivering that one-sided analysis, Beriam left the laboratory, trailed by his two bodyguards.

Over his shoulder, he made one last comment to Tim.

"I hate immortals. The failed sort included... You are a mere human, one who fears death and the loss of the world. Even if we are in different camps, you have my support."

Left behind, Tim was silent for a while—until, abruptly, he raised his head and issued orders to the two subordinates behind him.

"Meet up with the other guys right away and get out of this building. After

you're out, ditch the SoHo hideout and wait at Point C in New Jersey."

"...Understood."

"I'll...settle things with Dallas and Jacuzzi's group, up on the top floor, then bail."

His eyes seemed to be brooding over something, and he spoke firmly, as if trying to convince himself.

"...Although there's no telling what things are like up there now..."



The sky-view restaurant Babel

All the employees who worked at Mist Wall were immortal.

That sudden, implausible fact sent chills racing down the backs of Firo and Ennis. Even Ronny's eyes widened slightly, although he hadn't so much as twitched an eyebrow up until then.

They were facing a reality that was far too abnormal, and a variety of thoughts intersected in their minds.

Yet Vino only muttered, "Huh."

The mention of immortals didn't seem to have made much of an impression on him.

Meanwhile, Isaac and Miria were having one of their usual conversations: "Say, Miria, what's an immortal?"

"Maybe it means somebody who isn't dead?"

"I see. So it's someone who's alive, hmm? In that case, he meant there are no dead people in this building!"

"Yes, a happy workplace!"

Jacuzzi was unable to cope with the situation, which had abruptly ballooned on him, and his eyes were beginning to fill with fat tears.

Tick and Maria might not have been particularly interested: For the past little while, they'd been focused on Adele.

And as for Christopher, the key person here...

“...I see. And? Why are we running?”

...he looked back at Chi, seeming genuinely mystified.

“I did think you were a moron, but are you really that stupid?! Just wait until security guards who’ve learned they can’t die swarm all over us! In any case, how are you planning to fulfill Master Huey’s instructions to massacre everyone if they’re immortal?!”

Chané had been unreactive up until then, but at the sound of Huey’s name, her eyebrows shot up.

Utterly ignorant of anyone else’s circumstances, Christopher smiled and gave Chi his answer: “How? But that’s easy.”

As he murmured, Christopher looked at Firo and Ennis.

“We have two people who can kill immortals right here, remember?”

“Wha...?!”

Ignoring those two people, who’d been struck speechless, Christopher kept right on talking nonchalantly.

“We can just get Firo to help us out by eating twelve hundred people.”

It was true that Firo and Ennis could “eat” failed immortals, although it didn’t work the other way around. To be completely accurate, Ronny, Isaac, and Miria could do it as well, but at this point, Christopher didn’t seem to have realized what they were.

However, while this killed the other person, it also meant taking on the memories of their entire lifetime. Firo had already had far more than enough of that when he’d eaten Szilard, and Ennis probably had no intention of ever eating anyone again, either.

Regardless, the man in front of them kept talking matter-of-factly, without giving the slightest thought to their convenience.

“Who’d listen to this applesauce? Let’s go, Ennis.”

“Oh. Right...!”

To be honest, Ennis had wanted to talk a bit more with Christopher and the others, who were similar to her, but...

If I talk to them carelessly, I'm bound to get dragged into this.

She'd felt that sort of danger around Christopher, so she'd agreed to distance herself from them for now.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha, aw c'mon, Firo. It's not nice to abandon your friends. Besides, we haven't finished that earlier conversation yet. Have we, Ennis?"

"I understand what you've told me about yourselves. Nevertheless, I have no connection with Mas...with Szilard any longer."

"Not now. I don't mean now... What our boss is interested in is the past."

Christopher chuckled, shaking his head. Seeing Ennis stop in her tracks, he went on, sounding satisfied with himself. "You...or Firo, who ate Szilard. You probably know, don't you? How to create a homunculus that's close to perfect, such as yourself..."

"...!"

"Old man Szilard guarded that bit real well. Nobody managed to steal the secret."

He was asking about her origins, and Ennis's palms broke out in a cold sweat.

Picking up on her agitation, Firo spoke sharply, with his back still turned to her: "Ennis, don't listen!"

"Firo, you keep your mouth shut for a bit... Adele."

When Christopher called her name softly, Adele nodded quietly.

Firo and Ennis had started for the elevator. Adele ran up soundlessly—and, with no hesitation, thrust the cross-shaped spear she'd held ready at her side at the back of Firo's head.

"...!"

However:

At the last second, the tip abruptly halted.

Before anyone noticed, Vino had gotten between Firo and Adele, and he'd pinched the spearhead between his fingers, stopping it.

The spear thrust, which she'd unleashed with lethal force, had been stopped completely using only the strength in his fingers.

"It can't be..."

In a way, Adele was more shocked than she had been when Ronny had outmaneuvered her yesterday.

"Hey. What do you think you're doing to my childhood pal, huh?"

Vino glared at Adele with cold eyes.

"Thanks, Claire. You saved my neck."

"It's Felix."

Firo thanked him as if it was a matter of course, and Vino responded as if he was making small talk.

Then Firo gave Christopher and Adele some perfunctory advice: "You'd better be careful not to make this fella mad. As far as I know, he's the strongest human around."

"Quit that 'strongest human' stuff. It's just lame." Vino smiled and protested, but the strength in his fingertips didn't weaken in the slightest.

Adele tried to pull the spear back, but it didn't move. It might as well have been trapped in a vise.

Vino stared at the woman's face, then, suddenly remembering, murmured, "A cross-shaped spear... Oh. You're the one who scratched Chané's face, aren't you?"

The moment Vino said that—Christopher, smiling, turned a knife-gun on him.

"You're in the way, guy."

Bang Bang Bang

Three dry sounds rang out, and at almost the same time, three sharp, metallic noises echoed in the restaurant.

“...”

Just as Christopher fired the gun, Vino had moved the spear's tip, using it as a shield, and deflected all the bullets.

If he'd misread the bullets' trajectories even slightly, he probably wouldn't have survived. But there wasn't even a trace of cold sweat on Vino's face. On the contrary— “...Should we call that even?”

At those words, Adele noticed that something about her cheek felt wrong.

When it ricocheted, one of the bullets had grazed her, leaving a horizontal wound.

The same sort of wound she'd left on Chané's cheek the day before...

“Was that...on purpose?”

A thin film of sweat broke out on Christopher's face. He felt convinced of Vino's strength—and he smiled.

Vino didn't understand what that smile meant, and just then, a new voice echoed from the direction of the emergency stairwell.

“What the heck is this?”

Tim had come up the emergency stairs from the laboratory below, and he was blinking, unable to process the situation.

“Hey, Chi. Explain what's going on, would you?”

The man in question was standing silently beside the stairwell, dripping with sweat. As he answered, his expression was unusually serious. “The same as always. Christopher's indulging himself.”

Chi sounded as if he was feeling impatient and on edge, and Tim realized he already knew the building's secret, too.

“Dammit... Hey! Christopher! Retreat! We're pulling out!”

Christopher, who had his gun trained on Vino, answered without even looking. “Well, that's a problem, Tim. We're acting on orders different from yours, you know.”

“I'm ordering you as the leader of Larva! I'll assume your responsibility as

well!”

His yell was laced with anger, and Christopher quietly lowered the hand that held the gun.

“I see... If you’re going to go that far, then we’ll give up on the mission for now. We can’t actually do it without help from a full immortal anyway.”

Smiling quietly, Christopher spoke to Tim.

“In that case, *we have free time now, right?*”

“...Say what?”

By the time Tim spoke dubiously, Christopher was already moving.

Even though he had a gun, he intentionally closed the distance until he was within arm’s reach of Vino.

“!”

The sudden charge had taken the redhead by surprise, but he wasn’t particularly flustered. To counter it, he struck out sharply with the outer edge of his foot, but Christopher had already predicted that move.

“That’s no good. Just because God loves you—”

He jumped up onto Vino’s extended leg, stepped over the other guy’s thigh, and slammed a full-force knee kick into his exposed jaw.

With enough momentum that it seemed likely the people around him had felt the impact, Vino’s upper body arched backward unnaturally.

“—that’s no excuse to get full of yourself, puny human. ☆”

Claire...took an attack straight on?

It was something Firo had never seen before, and in spite of himself, he doubted his eyes.

Bent backward, for a moment, Vino stopped moving.

Christopher didn’t let that opportunity escape him: He launched a follow-up attack.

At some point, those unique knife-guns, the size of pistols, had appeared in

both his hands.

He spread his arms wide, then, like a praying mantis, brought both knife-guns down.

He was aiming at the base of Vino's throat, and the knives were on a course to sever the arteries on both sides of his neck.

However, Vino recovered a moment sooner, and he caught both those wrists with his hands.

"...That startled me a bit."

"You're just a human... Why did you hurt my friend Adele?"

What he was saying was thoroughly angry, but Christopher was wearing his usual gentle smile.

"Why? ...Yeah, well, if she'd apologized nicely, I guess I could've let her off, but... Let's just say it felt like the right move at the time."

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha. You're funny, guy. That answer was boring, though."

The tips of the knife-guns were still pointed at Vino's throat.

That meant the gun muzzles were trained on the same spot.

"Bye-bye."

He pulled both triggers simultaneously, and twin gunshots echoed through the top floor.

However, the bullets didn't gouge out the throat they'd targeted.

The moment his fingers had begun to move, Vino had launched himself off the floor, using the wrists he'd caught as pivots, and had vaulted over Christopher's head in a motion like an upside-down pendulum.

"...Whoops."

Vino tried to slam an elbow into him as he turned around, but Christopher had seen it coming, and he ducked and twisted, slipping past the elbow and aiming for the other guy's side with the blade of a knife-gun.

But Vino had seen *that* coming, and he launched himself into motion again,

spinning to the side and putting some distance between himself and his opponent.

“You’re amazing, fella. No, I mean it, seriously amazing. You’re about the third-strongest person I’ve ever seen. The strongest one is me, of course.”

It was Firo, not Christopher, who reacted to those words.

“...Who’s the second strongest?”

“The former Felix.”

“Who’s that?”

Ignoring Firo’s comeback, Vino cracked his neck and said to Christopher, “Well, what do you want to do? Keep going?”

“Didn’t I tell you? I’m planning to kill you.”

“Because...?”

“Because the rain is noisy.”

After he’d answered the way he always did, his face went just a little serious.

“Kidding. The actual reason is because you’re strong.”

“What’re you, a martial artist on a training journey?”

“See, I want to challenge God. God obviously loves you, so I want to kill you and destroy my complex over being something humans created... How does that sound?”

“Honestly, it’s appreciated. In a pain-in-the-ass sort of way.”

As Vino kept up his end of the dialogue, he smiled lightly, then started to walk, heading for the window.

“Firo and Chané can deal with stray bullets just fine, but...”

Tapping on the window, he made a suggestion to Christopher.

“...if we’re inside, we’ll drag Jacuzzi and the rest into this. *Let’s take it outside.*”

“...I think I’d probably lose interest during the elevator ride down.”

“No, I mean...”

There was a sharp crash, and the glass behind Vino shattered and fell away.

He’d smashed a big hole in it with a single backfist, and the air was violently sucked outside through the hole.

“Outside. See?”

No sooner had he spoken than Vino stepped out through the large hole in the window. The upper area of Mist Wall was shaped like a pyramid, and the sky-view restaurant ran from the base of the pyramid to a little farther up.

That said, one false step and the momentum would send them plunging straight toward a sheer cliff. On top of that, it was currently raining hard.

“Apparently, God had it in for your brain, at least...”

Christopher shook his head, sounding mildly appalled, but he also started toward the hole in the window with no hesitation.

“Hey... Christopher, wait!”

Tim had been watching from the sidelines, unable to keep up with the speed at which the situation was developing, but he abruptly came to his senses and called out, attempting to stop his on-paper subordinate.

“It’s no good.”

However, Chi—who’d known the man for many years—shook his head, having already given up.

“...I’ll go see this through.”

No sooner had he spoken than the claw user broke into a run as well, heading toward a world enveloped in a downpour.

Tim reached out, trying to stop him, but his hand cut uselessly through empty air. But he noticed there was already another figure making for the window: “That’s...the one who tried to slash me at Millionaires’ Row...”

“Aaah! Chané! Don’t go!”

Jacuzzi’s scream was in vain as well: The woman also disappeared through the broken window.

That meant the only ones left in the restaurant were Jacuzzi's group of three, Firo and Ennis, Isaac and Miria—who were in the kitchen, congratulating the manager for some unfathomable reason—Tim...and Adele, who stood as still as if she'd been frozen.

And:

The man who saw through everything. He still hadn't moved from his seat at the table.

Tick, too, was just looking around bewildered, while Maria was bound fast by her own heart, unable to move.



Why couldn't I do anything back there?

When the spear woman tried to stab the guy in the green hat...

Why didn't I knock that spear away with my katana and yell, "I'm your opponent!"?

Was it because the guy she went after was a total stranger? No. No, that's not it, amigo.

Am I afraid?

Why...? Why...?

Why was I relieved when Vino stepped in...?!

The howl of wind and rain intruded through the broken window.

In that space, which would have been perfectly silent otherwise, Maria kept her fists clenched.

She'd thought Tick's words had set her back on her feet.

Next time she ran into the spear woman, she'd been planning to challenge her to a rematch, and she'd intended to win it.

But what was she feeling now?

She was scared.

Confronted with the spear that had already defeated her once, she was

completely intimidated.

Can I win? Can I really win?

She kept asking herself that question, internally, over and over.

Can I still believe...in Murasámia?

While Maria stood there, unable to grasp the sword at her waist—Adele, who had seemed frozen until then, quietly raised her head.

Her face looked vaguely distracted, and before long, she began to murmur to herself.

“I was...um...frightened.”

“Huh?”

Not realizing she was talking to herself, Jacuzzi responded involuntarily.

At that, Adele turned to look at Jacuzzi and, still expressionless, slowly began to speak.

“I... Well... When that man...grabbed the tip of my spear, and I couldn’t move...I was really, really frightened... Nobody has ever done that to me with their bare hands before, and I... I never dreamed I’d lose to a bare-handed opponent...”

“U-um?”

“They’re all...so lucky... Christopher and Chi-Mei and Leeza all got to kill lots and lots of people. But I...”

Light began to gleam in her eyes, which seemed to be on the verge of breaking somehow, and Adele smiled at Jacuzzi.

“Uh, um, thanks.”

Jacuzzi ducked his head at her on reflex, but Adele ignored him. She turned and called to Tim, who was by the emergency stairwell.

“Tim...”

“Hey, you’re back, huh? Sorry, but could you go outside and bring Christopher and company back in...?”

“It’s all right, isn’t it?”

“Huh?”

When he saw Adele’s smile, Tim started to get a very bad feeling.

And then—that hunch became words and presented itself in reality.

“If this job has failed...*it’s all right to dispose of the throwaway pawns now, isn’t it?*”

“Huh?”

“I’m shaking. I can’t stop shaking. I’m sure it will stop if I kill someone; I just know it. If I kill and kill and kill, ever so many people, I’m absolutely positive it will stop...I think. So...it’s all right, isn’t it?!”

“Wha...? Huuuuuuh?!”

Jacuzzi gave a stunned shriek, and in that moment— —Adele drove her cross-shaped spear at the tattoo on his face.





As she gazed up at Mist Wall, Eve kept praying for the safety of her brother and Chané and all the others.

“Dallas is there, on that top floor...”

With a mixture of unease and anticipation, the girl looked at the towering white wall again—and abruptly realized something felt wrong.

Mist Wall’s silken whiteness was one of its selling points, but that looming monolith currently seemed to have a very slight red tinge to it.

The girl strained her eyes, and then she saw it.

To her regret, she saw it.

It wasn’t that the wall was stained red.

There was something very red mixed in with the rain falling in front of the building.

It vanished in an instant, but the girl’s eyes had caught it.

Blood. A rain of blood that seemed to slash through the white mist...



The very top of Mist Wall

“When I’m getting soaked by the rain, do you think I could say I’m coexisting with Nature?”

“What a shame. Since you’re in between ’em, the rain and the ground have to part in tears.”

“...That’s good. I didn’t see that comment coming. I’d expect no less from you.”

In the midst of the downpour, two men were cheerfully conversing.

Despite the fact that storm winds blustered around them; even standing would have been difficult for an ordinary person.

“You’re bleeding quite a lot.”

This quiet note came from Christopher.

As Vino stood in the rain, there was a growing dark-red stain on his shoulder.

“I don’t think you should push yourself. If you’ll admit you’ve lost, I’ll wait until after we’re friends to kill you.”

As he proposed this deal with incomprehensible terms, Christopher smiled benevolently, looking bashful.

“Well, it’s a handicap. Don’t worry about it... Or actually, if you worry about it and hold back on me, I’ll have it easier. That’ll be a big help. Frankly, I’m not really into this fight.”

Vino wasn’t the least bit out of breath, to the point where you had to wonder if he’d really been saddled with a handicap at all. It had to hurt quite a bit, but his only reaction had been a slight one, smaller than if he’d been stung by a mosquito.

“The biggest reason I don’t care is that, even if I win this, I don’t get anything out of it.”

“Sure you do. If you beat me, you can brag about it to the rest of Lamia.”

“Oho... So about where are you in the strength rankings for this Lamia group?”

“Who knows? We’ve never tried to kill each other, so I’ve got no idea.”

At that irresponsible response, Vino gave a small, quiet smile.

“Good answer, but I feel like you ducked the question.”

“I feel like I did, too. It feels pretty good.”

Up here, at the top of the building, the terraces at the corners were small and frequent, so it was possible to climb higher than the restaurant.

They’d headed up toward the peak and had had another ferocious exchange with knife-guns and bare hands about halfway up the white pyramid, but— — Christopher’s bullet had ricocheted off the wall of the building and, by accident, had struck Vino square in the shoulder.

The blood that had burst from his shoulder had sprayed into the air, then turned into a rain of red and fallen to the ground.

If this had happened to a regular person, the mental shock alone would have been pretty bad. To Vino, however, the blood flowing from his own body seemed to be as natural as breathing.

Vino kept his cool, and Christopher looked just as composed as he spoke to him.

“...You can’t beat me.”

“What, really?! I had no idea. Oh man, what’ll I do?”

His opponent was still joking around. Ignoring that, Christopher continued, indifferently, “Our careers are different, see. In the time since I was born, for nearly fifty years, this is all I’ve done. Without even being told why, I’ve killed, killed, killed, killed, killedkilled-killed killedkilledkilled... That’s the kind of life I’ve led.”

Closing in, step-by-step, he gradually tightened his grip on the knife-guns.

“Even at night, when I’m asleep...I’m constantly imagining the moment of the kill. If I don’t do that, I can’t sleep well! I’ve actually killed about five hundred people, and in my head, I’ve killed ten or twenty times that... I don’t even bother to differentiate between dreams and reality anymore... What do you think of that, hmm? Of me?”

As he asked his question, Christopher temporarily stopped in his tracks, and Vino candidly told him exactly what he thought.

“It’s a bit late to point this out, but...your eyes and teeth are awesome.”

“You’re correct, but I feel like you ducked the question!”

“...So while you were blowing smoke to camouflage it—did you figure out what you’re going to do now that you’re out of bullets?”

At that remark, which was delivered as if he’d seen right through him, Christopher’s smile grew even more entertained.

“Not at all!”



The sky-view restaurant Babel

Adele's cross-shaped spear thrust forward sharply.

Its tip seemed about to impale Jacuzzi's face, but just before it did, a silver object intercepted and stopped it.

There was a metallic clang, and white sparks scattered across the carpet like snow.

"...Please...don't get in my way."

"I can't do that, amiga! I'm—your opponent. Right?"

I went and did it.

After she spat out the aggressive words, a fierce regret welled up in Maria's heart.

But...I can't go back now, I guess.

"...I will kill you, you know? Um... That means it's all right, doesn't it...? If I kill you..." Adele timidly followed up with that unsettling question, and for a moment, Maria hesitated to answer.

Then, to disguise her own feelings, she looked back at Jacuzzi and the others.

"Go on! What are you doing?! You'd better get away fast, amigos!"

"Huh? Oh... Y-y-y—yes'm!"

Maria had yelled to spur them on, but she'd also widened the distance between them.

The next moment—

—as she leaped back, something sharp and silver skimmed past the tip of her nose.

"...!"

Adele had been standing in the middle of the restaurant, and she'd held the spear as close to the butt end of its shaft as she could, then *swung it around* in a circle, with herself at its center.

Maria should have put more than enough distance between them.

Even so, it hadn't been enough.

The range controlled by that spear was far beyond what she'd imagined, and another shiver ran down Maria's back.

Still...what she did just now isn't how you'd normally use a spear.

As if to reinforce Maria's thought, Firo, who'd been watching from a distance, was muttering, "Oh, c'mon... Don't swing that thing around like a kid."

As weapons, spears were designed with a focus on thrusting, but Adele tended to use her cross-shaped spear to pay out a variety of slashing attacks.

It seemed likely that, instead of learning from a proper teacher or textbook, she'd polished her skills using nothing but her own instincts.

As a result, even simple "swings" like the one she'd just performed had a nasty, intimidating edge, and they frightened everyone who saw them.

Still...I'm self-taught, too!

Now it's just a matter of seeing which of us is better at outfoxing the other...

Her defeat yesterday had shown far too plainly that this wasn't an opponent who could be easily beaten through spirit or grit. Still, she wasn't sure whether simple but clever schemes would work on her, either.

I won't lose. I have to believe in katanas, in Japanese swords, in Murasamia's strength...!

Firo, who'd been watching, whispered to Ennis beside him: "...If the dame with the Japanese swords doesn't manage it, I'll stop her."

"Firo."

"...Seriously... For claiming to be your siblings, they're all so loony that there's no comparing them to you."

As she listened to him, Ennis remembered something.

"There's one...missing..."

"Huh?"

The woman who called me on the telephone. The one who said her name was Leeza...

Where is she now?



Holding an empty knife-gun in each hand, Christopher squared off against Vino, keeping a certain distance.

“Those are some unique heaters. Are they a type of Apache pistol? ...Frankly, though...both as guns and as knives, they’re kind of half-assed, aren’t they?”

Vino’s ruthless comment actually cheered Christopher up.

“That’s what’s good about them.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Both as a natural creature and as something artificial, I’m also half-assed. They’re perfect for me.”

“You’re weirdly masochistic... I bet you don’t have many friends.”

Christopher took that additional mercilessness with a smile.

In the downpour, that smile exaggerated his peculiar eyes and teeth. The fact that his other features were handsome only served to strengthen the “vampire” impression.

“Friends are great, aren’t they?”

“I don’t deny it.”

“At times like this, during mortal combat with no rules—they do things like help you from the shadows...”

Just as he finished speaking, a small silver disc appeared in the rain-drenched sky.

It wasn’t a UFO. If you looked closely, you could tell it was a ring made of steel or a similar material. If you held still and looked, you could also tell the ring’s edge was sharpened.

And that the object was a type of weapon popularly known as a chakram...

There was no telling where the silver blade had come from, but it was headed straight for the back of Vino’s head.

When it was just about to strike his cervical vertebrae, Vino spoke quietly.

“Yeah—you said it.”

The next instant, there was a noise of metal scraping against metal—
“Apparently, if you’re engaged to them, they watch your back right out in the open.”

Behind him stood Chané, wet from the rain...with a metal ring caught on the blade of her knife.



The sky-view restaurant Babel

“Um...pleeease, mister. Stop that lady.”

“?!”

Right as Maria and Adele were squaring off, Tim felt as though his heart might stop.

He’d been caught completely by surprise.

He’d never imagined that Tick, his brother, would speak to him in a situation like this.

“...Stop her?”

What’s this “please, mister” business? Don’t talk to your little brother like that.

“Yes. I thought yooou could probably do it, mister...”

“I doubt it. Her switch got flipped. It’s that Claire fella’s fault.”

What’s with the “mister”? Quit being polite to your kid brother. This is what makes you a moron, big bro.

“Is thaaat right...”

“...”

Notice already. Figure it out, you idiot! We’re right here, looking at each other, and you still...

“...Do you want to save the Mexican doll that badly?”

“Huh? No. Thaaat’s not it. Because, I mean, Maria won’t lose. Not ever.”

“Not ever”? Yeah, right. Did you forget about yesterday’s death match already?

“Then why do you want to stop her?”

“Well...they’re both just fighting to redeem themselves, so...there’s really no point in the fight itself...”

“...You’re right there.”

You’ve always been like that. You’ve always said stuff that made you seem like a mind reader... Hunh. Redeeming themselves? That’s the opposite of me. Listen, Tick, I’m here to throw away everything about myself and my past, including you.

“Buuut...if you won’t stop her... Maria’s my precious friend, so I’ll be taking her side... I’m sorry.”

With those final words, he ambled back to where he’d been standing earlier.

As Tim watched him go, for a moment, he had an impulse to introduce himself to the guy as his little brother—but he managed to quash the idea at the last second.

Am I an idiot?! What would be the point of introducing myself now?!

As Tim shook his head violently, what Beriam had said a short while earlier ran through his mind.

“You and your people are like butterflies.”

“No one will prey on you. You’ll simply be immobilized and starve to death.”

That’s never gonna happen to me. Even if I’m a butterfly now—someday, I’ll turn into the kind of butterfly who tears the web apart and eats the spider.

If I’m going to make that happen, I can’t retake my past here.

Because right now, for the past me, the one who wanted bonds with other people, this spot where I’m standing is much too painful...



“In the end, see, those of us in Lamia have personalities that were practically

formed by Huey's experiments."

Christopher held out the blades on his knife-guns, smiling masochistically.

"In that case, I'd guess all his experiments were biased. Are you one of those guys? During the banana-stealing experiment, I bet you were the type who went and grabbed the spare banana from the storeroom around back and ate that."

"Wrong. I wouldn't eat the crummy banana. I'd take the stick, jump the researcher, and steal his valuables. Not that you can do stuff like that to Huey."

"Didn't Huey ever teach you it's better not to tell people what you can't do?"

Giving an odd answer, Vino evaded a knife by a hair.

"Come to think of it...Adele... She wasn't taught anything. She's empty inside. They branded her useless right at the start, and at first, they only used her in human experimentation. Except, during the last half, she helped me out at work quite a bit, so...she seems to feel she'll be accepted if she kills people."

While the two men fought, Chané was keeping an eye out for the silver rings, which came flying from nowhere in particular.

They were thrown at irregular intervals, and they were obviously aimed either at Vino or at her.

She'd assumed this was the type of enemy who'd never show itself, but when she'd deflected a tenth ring with her knife, a voice that seemed to belong to that enemy spoke to her.

"Hiiiiii."

"...?"

In the driving rain, a voice that seemed to have no source pierced Chané's ears.

"You must be Chané. I've heard lots of stories about you from the twins..."

It was a sultry woman's voice, but Chané didn't care; there was a good possibility she could take advantage of the voice to catch the woman off guard.

"You and that red-headed boy seem pretty close, but...you do know we're

Master Huey's messengers, don't you?"

After a little hesitation, Chané nodded quietly. She couldn't bring herself to ignore or lie about questions regarding her father, no matter what.

"If... Just hypothetically, mind you... If Master Huey told you to kill that man... who would you choose? Him, or Master Huey?"

"..."

On the surface, Chané stayed calm, but as a matter of fact, at this point in time, her emotions were already running very high. It was a possibility she constantly kept in mind, and it was what she feared most.

For just a moment, that straightforward question in the midst of battle made black spots appear in her vision. And, as if her adversary had been waiting for that, four rings flew at her at once.

Chané slapped down all four of them with the knives she held, but her momentary confusion kept her from seeing the fifth one that had been launched a bit later.

In the instant that fifth disc was about to slice open Chané's throat—Vino's hand reached in from behind her and caught it like a Frisbee.

He'd stopped it by pinching it with his fingers to kill its rotation, and the blade hadn't touched his skin. Vino answered the mystery voice—or, more accurately, Chané.

"What's the problem? Just carry out that order *and* choose me."

"...What are you talking about?"

Leeza's voice sounded put out, but Vino didn't care. He kept going.

"If he tells her to kill me, she can just keep trying to kill me. I'll keep defending, and we can romance each other while we're doing that. Hey, that sounds a bit like true love."

At this, Chané turned mildly disgusted eyes on her fiancé...and then gave a gentle smile that only he could see.

In response to that smile, Vino shouted, amping up his energy.

“Okay! The mystery voice’s true form is—there!”

No sooner had he spoken than he hurled the disc he’d caught at Christopher.

Christopher dodged it by the skin of his teeth and protested: “I don’t know what you’re trying to pull.”

“...I thought the punch line was that you were a ventriloquist or that you had another face in your stomach! Or something...”

“How were you going to explain the chakrams?”

“They just flew over here by accident.”

As he spoke, Vino tried to climb to a higher terrace—and realized that, before they’d noticed, they’d reached the very top of the building.

While they’d been carrying on that futile conversation and continuing their migrating battle, they’d finally conquered Mist Wall.

Not that there was any point in doing so...



How many clashes did this make?

The sparks illuminated Maria’s face, and she sprang away, putting distance between them.

Unlike the fight in the entrance hall yesterday, she was able to take as much distance as she needed here.

If there was a problem, it was that Adele was also able to brandish her spear as freely as she wanted to.

“If this keeps up, we’ll just have a repeat of yesterday, amigos.”

As she remembered the end of that earlier battle in the entryway, before the shame hit her, Maria came up against a hard question: If she was willing to go down with her opponent, she might be able to manage it somehow.

That wouldn’t count as a victory for her, though. Furthermore, it would be a betrayal of what Eve had said to her a short while ago.

“I’ve absolutely got to defeat this spear woman and survive...”

Come to think of it, there at the end yesterday...how did he get my swords away from me?

Due to the shock of losing to Adele, she'd completely forgotten about it, but she'd remembered that their bout had ended in an exceedingly incomprehensible way.

And...that the individual who had been at the heart of that mystery was currently seated in a chair very close to her.

...Ding...

Just as she registered that fact, an elevator announced its arrival, and as the doors opened, several security guards swarmed out.

There were all wearing Nebula employee badges, and it wasn't clear whether they'd heard the noise and come to check it out, or whether they were security guards from the first floor who'd woken up.

As soon as the doors were open, they spotted Adele waving a large blade around right in front of them, and they attempted to subdue her, their hands going to the guns at their waists.

However—

“Please...don't interfere...”

—with no hesitation, Adele ran one of the guards through. Then she set to work finishing off the others, who were quaking with fear.

And for that brief interval, Maria got some time to herself.

As she breathed deeply, catching her breath, her eyes went to Ronny, who was sitting beside her in a chair.

The day before, Ronny had displayed terrifying presence, but now Maria was hardly able to sense any sort of aura from him at all.

In spite of the ongoing situation, the man's breathing was perfectly calm. His attitude seemed to say that, no matter what happened, he'd be able to do something about it—even if no one else could.

“...Yes?”

With no particular change of expression, Ronny turned reptilian eyes on Maria.

“Uh...”

“If you want to know the secret of yesterday, I don’t believe this is the time for that. Or, if you’d like me to help you, I’ll take active steps to do so, but...”

Ronny spoke before Maria did, as if he’d read her mind.

Then, at the end, he made a comment that tested her heart: “If you borrow my help to defeat that girl...will you be able to refrain from throwing your swords away?”

His voice had been cold when he asked the question, and it shook Maria’s heart violently.

What...was I about to do?

She hadn’t been thinking of having this man help her. She’d thought only that learning about yesterday’s situation might give her some sort of clue.

But—is that really true? Deep down, wasn’t I considering relying on this guy, who seems to be a friend of Tick’s?

If I was...then I’m not qualified to hold Murasámia any lon—

When she’d thought that far, a figure interrupted from beside her.

“Ronny.”

“Tick...?”

Tick had been watching from the sidelines, and he beamed at the man.

The situation wasn’t really conducive to smiles, but no matter the circumstances, Tick’s eyes always retained the shape of one. Even in this moment, when Maria was headed into another crisis, Tick was beaming as if he wasn’t worried about a thing.

“Maria won’t eever throw away her swords.”

“Oh? What makes you say that?”

Intrigued, Ronny’s eyes went to Tick.

“Because Maria won’t ask for your help, Rooonny. Even if she did, she wouldn’t feel obligated to you, you know? After all, Maria’s strong!”

“I see... You’re right. I apologize for tempting you.”

Ronny softly lowered his eyes, then said nothing more.

“...”

Meanwhile.

Every one of Tick’s innocent words had made Maria feel quietly inferior.

This, when she wasn’t able to believe in herself...

Oh, that’s right.

Back then, when I jumped in to save that tattooed guy in spite of myself—it was because Tick was watching me.

It wasn’t that he’d seemed to be hoping for anything. Their eyes had simply met by accident.

But it had made Maria feel indebted.

To the man who’d promised, with a frank smile, to believe in her victory.

Exposed to Tick’s gaze, she’d wanted to run from herself and from the burden of his promise as fast as she could.

She’d chosen to flee into the fight.

One more time.

Just one more time, I want some kind of push. I know it’s wrong to lean on stuff like this. Right now, though, even if it’s only two or three of them, I want words that show I believe I’ll win.

When she thought that, Maria held Murasámia out to Tick.

“Tick... I’ll do it. This time, I’ll beat that girl.”

“Wooow.”

“So listen, Tick... Will you believe in Murasámia’s strength with me?”

“I can’t do thaaat.”

She hadn't expected that answer from him, and her posture crumpled.

"No, but—! Tick..."

Maria sounded as if she were pleading for something, but Tick interrupted her, speaking firmly.

"I can't, because *you're* what I believe in, Maria. Not that sword."

"Huh...?"

Tick was smiling away as he spoke, and Maria's eyes widened in curiosity.

"I said it lots of times before, but I can only believe in what I've seen... So I might not be able to believe in your bond with that sword or in your convictions or in your determination. I did want to believe you'd win, though, so...I decided I'd believe in yooou."

This wasn't empty consolation; nothing like it. Tick was simply putting what he felt into words, carefully, and conveying it honestly to Maria.

"I've seen you, Maria, so I know. I know that when you don't have a job, you're allways practicing in all sorts of ways. I know you worked really, really hard. I saw that with my own eyes. Of all the people I've seen up till now, you worked the hardest at training for fights. That's why I believe you'll win, Mariaaa."

"Tick..."

"Why don't we do this, then? You know that *katana* lots and lots better than I do, right? So, you believe in your *katana*, and I'll believe in yooou. You see? That way, nobody's lonely."

Tick's thoughtless words made Maria think hard.

Looking at the sword in her hand, she questioned herself.

How well do I know these katanas, I wonder?

How well do I know my own strength?

Wasn't I fighting in order to find out?

While she searched for those answers, Maria squeezed Murasámia tightly.

“Maybe I haven’t been looking at Murasámia at all. Maybe, in the end, I was only looking at myself...”

“Huh?”

Just as Maria murmured softly, and Tick tilted his head, looking bewildered...

...a guy’s tearful voice rang out, yanking her heart back to reality.

“Aaaaaaaaah! No, stop, the security guards are getting slashed! Why are you just standing there talking?!”

Jacuzzi’s voice woke up Maria’s mind, and she looked to Adele.

The security guards had already been wiped out, and the blood that stained the carpet was just beginning to writhe, preparing to return to its owners’ bodies.

At the moment, Adele was fighting Ennis and Firo.

Apparently, Ennis had tried to stop her from killing the security guards, and they’d clashed. This seemed to be Firo’s first time going up against a spear as well, and even though it was two against one, Adele didn’t seem to have retreated a step.

Even if she was self-taught, Adele’s movements left her opponents no openings. Watching her fight, Maria had to murmur, in spite of herself, “She’s... tough...”

A shudder ran through the Latina’s back, but this shiver didn’t feel like the sticky terror she’d had up until a moment ago.

“Still—we’ve just got to do it, don’t we, amigos?”

Quietly drawing her *katanas* and standing tall, she turned to face the center of the restaurant, where Adele was leveling her spear.

It looked like a gunslinger’s dueling stance, but she already held a *katana* in each hand.

“I’m sorry, Murasámia. Up till now, I’ve been pushing all the work onto you. I let your strength determine whether I won or lost...”

As she whispered, she planted a light kiss on the back edge of the blade.

“Murasámia’s not my tool. This kid’s...my *compañero*!”

Addressing those words to Tick, who was looking on behind her, she nodded, then shouted at Firo and Ennis: “Hold it! That woman—she’s my *prey*, amigos!”

At that clear declaration, the pair paused for a moment, while Adele turned to look at her dubiously.

“Oh... You’re...still here?”

Spitting out hypocritically courteous words, Adele leaped one step back from Firo and Ennis, shifting her attention to the swordswoman.

“You still...don’t understand? I...did tell you, didn’t I? In order to beat a spear, you need to be three times as strong as your opponent...”

“I heard you, amiga. And right now, I’m twice as strong as you, right?”

“That’s...right. I admit that, but—”

At those words, Maria broke into an artless smile.

“There, you see?! Then I’m going to win this!”

“...?”

Adele looked perplexed.

The other onlookers also waited for Maria to go on, wondering what she meant, and— —with a pointed smile, like a little kid who’d just thought up a prank, she spoke firmly.

“Because I’ve got two *katanas*, see? *That’s twice as strong, times two swords, so I’m four times as strong as you*, amiga!”

“?! ”

At that crazy logic, an uncomfortable hush enveloped the restaurant.

Isaac and Miria, who’d heard that a sword dance had started again and had come to watch, gave innocent cheers: “It’s true! If it’s three times versus four times, then four times is tougher!”

“Yes, the *katana* girl wins, then!”

Tick, who was bending his fingers down and counting, seemed just as

impressed as Isaac: *“Wow, it’s true!”*

Most of the others looked as if they wanted to yell, “Like heck it is!” but her voice had been filled with such self-confidence that they couldn’t make the retort.

And Ronny... Unusually for him, he was chuckling quietly, as if genuinely amused.

“...Even empty bravado is impressive when you take it that far.” Adele probably thought she’d been made fun of. With an expression of blended disgust and anger, she quietly took a step forward.

It had been a casual step.

She was taking her opponent lightly, so she hadn’t put any thought into the move.

And—Maria didn’t overlook it.

Right before Adele’s foot touched the floor, she dashed forward— —and threw her treasured *katana*, Murasámia, *into the air*.

“?!”

Adele had been caught off guard by the sudden approach, too, but the thrown *katana* confused her completely.

The blade that had been flung into the air was parallel with the ground, and its tip was pointing at Adele.

Gradually, gradually, as if moving in slow motion...

She threw it at me? No, it won’t reach me from there!

When she looked at Maria, the swordswoman was gripping her remaining *katana* with both hands, in a thrusting stance not found in any textbook—holding it still by her left shoulder, parallel with the ground—and charging at her.

One sword, and she’s speeding up?! In other words...that “two katanas” declaration was a bluff?

Deciding that it must have been, Adele narrowed her target to the single

katana.

However, in the next instant, Maria shoved the tip of Kochite—the sword she was holding—into the guard of Murasámia, which was flying through the air.

They formed a shape like a series of batteries and, propelled from behind, Murasámia rushed toward Adele.

For this one moment, when her weapon was the length of two swords, Maria had definitely pierced the spear's range.

As if I'd let her confuse me!

Adele promptly swung her spear up from below, slapping the tip that was headed for her throat out of the way.

That move sealed her fate.

Adele had already been tricked earlier, when the *katana* was hurled.

Ordinarily, no thrust would have worked well from a configuration like that one. She should have just waited for it to fall apart on its own.

On being shown the double-long sword, her anxious mind had arbitrarily added “mass” to the equation, and she'd used what she felt was appropriate force to slap it away.

As a result, the *katana* whose tip had been deflected spun vigorously through space.

But—the second *katana* kept coming.

The blade of the sword, supported by a two-handed grip, was heading straight for Adele's upper body.

Maria concentrated all her heart, mind, and strength on the tip of the thinly struck blade— —and charged, slicing through the air, determined to slash through a single enemy. When Adele realized what that sight meant— —she *locked eyes with the blade.*

Oh n...

By the time she caught on, it was too late.

She'd swung the spear up with too much force. As a result, she'd left her body

wide open, and she wasn't able to shield herself in time.



And more than anything—

She's fas— AaaaaaAAAAaaaaaah!

Once Maria's blade was within striking distance, it stretched with a speed beyond what she'd imagined.

The tip of the second blade was drawn into the top of Adele's completely defenseless shoulder.

Adele's pale skin.

The silver blade seeped into that skin, the color of which contrasted nicely with Maria's.

Quickly...

Sharply...

Deeply...

Surely—

From that thrust, the blade moved, shifting slightly upward, and— —Maria's *katana* emphatically *tore through* Adele's body.

That one attack decided the fight.

“—Ah——aaah——”

The moment when flesh split, and an impossible space suddenly opened up.

Pain and a sense of loss coursed through her simultaneously, and for the space of that first breath, her brain made her forget to scream.

Even though it was her shoulder that had been impaled, electricity ran down the nerves in her legs, and the strength went out of her knees all at once.

The deep wound gored her shoulder. And inside the red, just for a moment, she thought she glimpsed white.

The instant Adele's entire body found its pulse again in the midst of that shock— —blood spurted out.

It was as if the blood itself were a living thing.

“.....—”

Even then, Adele didn't scream.

As if to shore up her dimming consciousness, she braced the spear's ferrule near her feet, letting it hold her weight instead of her nerveless legs.

She fell to her knees, then tried to catch her breath, but even breathing in and out by turns wasn't working the way she wanted it to.

When she tried to exhale, she kept inhaling in short, small gasps.

The sensation that her lungs were spasming ran through her, and blood pulsed out in rhythm with her trembling.

As if to strike an additional blow—

—a long, thin silver object pressed against the back of her undamaged left shoulder.

“...Was this your first time getting cut?”

Maria was now the uncontested victor, and Adele answered her question with silence.

It wasn't clear whether she'd never intended to answer or whether she wanted to but wasn't able to speak.

There was no strength left in her wounded right shoulder, and it hung limply. She didn't even try to look at her opponent.

“...It looks like this is the first time you've been cut for real, amiga.”

Among the people Maria had killed in the course of her work, some had tried to rip out her throat with their teeth even after she'd cut off both their arms, and others had lived for a little while after she'd stabbed them through the heart.

This meant that an impaled shoulder wasn't enough to set her mind completely at ease, but from the way Adele was looking, there was no need to be wary.

Maria sighed, drew her sword back, then turned to Tim.

“If you get the bleeding stopped soon, she'll live.”

Those words seemed to bring Tim to his senses, and he hastily ran to Adele, calling her name.

He tore up a nearby tablecloth, using it to stanch the bleeding. As he worked, he spoke to the Latina: “I thought you were going to kill her.”

“If this were a job, I would have. But also, yesterday, I was the one who should have died, so...I’m paying for that.”

As she said those words, Maria walked up to Tick. Her face, which had been tense, broke into a huge grin. “I won, Tick!”

Tick, who’d been given that report before anyone else, met her with his usual smile. “So, Maria, what you’re feeling right now is—”

“You don’t have to say it! Just smile with me, okay, amigo?!”

When she grinned and said that to Tick, the smile wasn’t her ordinary, innocent, splendid one. It was filled with something gentle, and there was a warmth to it.

However, she promptly switched back to her usual confident face, then got carried away and started boasting: “Thanks, Tick. Because of you, I feel really fantastic! Right now, I could— Yes, I’m positive. I could cut even God! Even iron, even the wind, even these gloomy rain clouds!”

Beaming, she walked over to the window, quietly lowered her hips—and drew, in one fast, vigorous motion.

As the blade slid from its sheath, it made a bell-like sound...

And outside the window, a miracle occurred.

“Wha...?”

“Ooooh...”

As if synchronizing itself to Maria’s *katana* stroke, a break had opened in the clouds, and bright curtains of light had begun to shine through in places.

As the sunlight lanced in with timing that seemed nothing short of miraculous, Maria let it beam down on her as if it were only to be expected.

“—There, see?”

Firo and the others were making a racket about phenomenal coincidences, but Ronny had concealed his presence, and he murmured to himself, ignoring them.

“You know that was no coincidence... Much less a miracle.”

As he tapped his temple lightly with an index finger, he was smiling as if he'd just pulled off a successful prank.

“It was congratulations... That's right: Congratulations...”



While the people in the restaurant were distracted by the view outside, Tim had managed to stop Adele's bleeding.

“Are you all right?”

The young woman seemed to have finally calmed down; little by little, she began to speak.

“Tim... Tim...”

“I don't have any painkillers, but we'll get you to a doctor right away. Just hang on.”

“Am I...use...less?”

As she bore up under the fierce pain, Adele spoke as if she was frightened of something.

“I was cut... First time...in my life... Cut... The blood... With his fingers... The spear...wouldn't move...”

She was probably disoriented from the shock: Her losses to Claire and Maria seemed to have gotten muddled together in her mind.

“Enough of that, just calm down.”

“I...I...!”

“Calm down!”

Tim helped her sit up, then put his arms around Adele and got her on her feet.

She also tried to stand under her own steam; she used her spear as a staff,

managing to support herself.

“Dammit, we can’t wait around for Christopher and the rest of ’em.”

Clicking his tongue in annoyance, Tim started to leave the restaurant, but— — a familiar figure blocked their way.

“—Hey there.”

“Dallas! Where have you been? Well, never mind that; here, help me get Adele out...”

Tim swallowed his words without finishing the sentence.

Dallas was gazing at him and Adele, and Tim had registered a clear intent to kill in those eyes.

“You...”

“Who’d have thought I’d get my chance this soon...? I figured I’d use Jacuzzi and his pals, but... I guess I got lucky.”

Slowly, he walked up to the two, who each had an arm around the other’s shoulders, and drew his trusty knife from his jacket.

It had ended up going into the oil drum with him, so the whole blade was rusted, but getting stabbed with that would probably result in more pain and suffering than if he’d used another knife.

“To think you’d go out of control and destroy yourselves for me— Wha...?”

In midsentence, Dallas realized a silver blade had sprouted from his own chest.

He’d begun to raise his knife, but the head of the cross-shaped spear was buried deep in his torso.

“Hunh...?”

Just as he realized the spear in Adele’s left hand had run him through, Dallas coughed up a large quantity of blood.

“For someone on...your level, Dallas...one arm...is...enough...”

“Looks like you underestimated us. Go take a nap.”

Tim drew a handgun from his jacket, preparing to send a bullet into Dallas's brain, but— —as he spat up bloody foam, Dallas was smirking.

"But...the luckiest thing was...!"

Reacting to that yell, the people who'd been looking out the window turned around.

"Meeting that mad bomber with the glasses and eye patch last night!"

As Dallas's shout ended, Tim realized something felt wrong.

Sizz z-z-z-z sizz z-z z-z z-z-z z

What's that noise?

"Huh?"

When she heard Dallas's yell, Nice looked at him, blinking her eye.

She had absolutely no idea what had been lucky about meeting her.

However, the next instant—a vaguely familiar light caught her eye. It was flickering inside Dallas's jacket.

The light was unique, a mixture of red and yellow and white sparks, like a firework...

When she realized what it was, Nice's face went pale, and she screamed.

"Ru— ...Get doooown!"

That's...that's—! That's the high-powered explosives we stole from the train —!



"A rain of blood? It couldn't be."

"But just a moment ago, I'm sure I..."

Eve and Fang were looking up at Mist Wall's top floor from where they stood, near the entrance of the building across the way.

"In the first place, if something was happening inside, you know it wouldn't be raining blood out here."

"That's true, but..."

Eve still looked uneasy, and Fang spoke firmly, trying to cheer her up.

“It’ll be fine! Vino and Chané are with them. As long as the building doesn’t disappear on us, there’s absolutely nothing to worry about.”

Just as Fang thumped his chest, a red explosion welled up near the top floor of Mist Wall.

Boooooooooooooooooom...

A fraction of a second later, there was a roar— —and a few seconds after that, lots of glass fragments rained down, right before their eyes.

As they stood there, speechless, the splinters of glass sparkled.

Some of them were tinted red with blood...

Even more strangely, some of that red raced back toward the sky, traveling up the white wall at breakneck speed—but unfortunately, not a soul noticed.



“The sun’s come out, and *Lamia* means ‘vampire,’ right? Shouldn’t you be turning to ashes?”

“Vampires turning to ashes in the sun... You’ve been watching too many talkies.”

“Even a human would turn to ashes if you shoved them into the sun, though. Or, no, would they evaporate?”

Christopher and Vino had kept up their absurd conversation as they fought, and even now, neither of them was showing any sign of fatigue.

They were soaked to the skin with rain. It was likely that neither of them was sweating much, if at all.

For some reason, there was an abrupt break in the clouds, and even though it was raining, sunlight shone on their skin.

“Nature can be so whimsical. That’s why I love it.”

Smiling quietly, Christopher spread his arms wide in the rain, an exaggerated gesture.

“So because your birth was unnatural, you’re trying to merge with nature by

loving it?”

Vino was indifferent, and Christopher scratched his head, as if embarrassed.

“You nailed it.”

But just as he admitted it—

—a flash of mixed red and orange flickered below where Vino, Christopher, and the others were standing.

A moment later, there was a dull quaking under their feet, and the noise of the blast reached them clearly.

“What was that?”

Christopher looked at the explosion as if it mystified him, but to Vino, the color of the blast seemed familiar.

“Oh.”

I’m pretty sure that stuff was the Flying Pussyfoot’s hidden cargo...

He didn’t say it, and the two of them watched the flames disappear into thin air.

For a moment, Chané had glanced in the direction of the explosion as well, but because a chakram had come flying at her immediately afterward, she hadn’t had time to really look.

Vino gazed at the situation for a while, but then he muttered, as if he’d remembered something, “Sorry, but... Chané? Would you go see if everybody’s okay down there?”

The woman nodded, then, deflecting a spinning spike wheel, ran down as if plummeting over the edge of the building.

“Hey, hang on... What about you, guy? In the meantime, you’re what? Are you planning to take on Leeza and me by yourself?”

Christopher shook his head, appalled, but after some light warm-up exercises, Vino squared up, and his eyes looked just a little different from what they had a moment ago.

“Okay, then. The sun’s out and everything. *It’s about time I got serious.*”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! You’re a cocky one... Really cocky.”

Right after Christopher, startled, muttered this, several chakrams bore down on Vino’s back. Leeza had apparently given up on Chané, and she was putting all her efforts into cooperating with Christopher.

“Great... Sure. I’ll take ‘em!”

Even as he spoke, those six silver rings should have been carving up Vino’s body.

However—in the next instant, an unbelievable sight leaped onto the stage.

“Huh...?”

“These are pretty nifty.”

Vino’s hands, which had been empty up until that point, now held six chakrams.

There was no doubt that several silver rings had flown at his back with the aim of assassinating him.

However—Vino *hadn’t even turned around*.

“What’s going—”

Just as Christopher spoke, Vino threw all the chakrams he held at once.

“—on?”

The six blades had been flung at the same time, but each sketched a beautiful spiral—and began to converge on the spot where Christopher stood.

“——!!”

In the instant he sensed danger, he’d already leaped, and multiple rings plunged into the spot where he’d been standing a moment ago.

“How...?”

Flustered, he recovered his balance—but Vino was already right there.

“Checkmate.”

Smiling, the redhead put his right hand on Christopher’s throat.

“The thing is, I wanted to fight with Chané a bit longer, so I was holding back. It doesn’t look like the situation downstairs is going to let me get away with that, though.”

“...!”

Christopher couldn’t read the extent of this guy’s skills, so he wasn’t able to resist or surrender.

“That’s insane... Leeza’s chakrams... How did you...?”

Even as he spoke, a ring flew at the back of Vino’s head.

Without so much as shifting his gaze, Vino put an arm around behind him and snagged it out of the air.

“What? You’re not even looking, so why...?”

“No, I’m looking. Don’t worry; I don’t have eyes back there. I’m not *that* inhuman.”

“Then what are you looking at, huh?! There’s nothing here that would reflect what’s behind you—”

In the moment when he began to yell those words—Vino put out two fingers and gently poked Christopher with them, right below his eyes.

It can’t be.

“You just thought, ‘It can’t be,’ huh?”

“...”

“I bet you didn’t think I was watching the scenery reflected in your eyes, did you?”

That’s ridiculous... What sort of vision does he have?

Is this guy—really human?

The next thing he knew, Christopher realized cold sweat was running down his back in earnest.

“I see... You really are humanity’s strongest.”

“Don’t say that sort of stuff.”

Christopher fell silent for a little while. Then he murmured, smiling in a self-mocking smile, “God might actually love you.”

In response, Vino’s voice was quiet. “There’s no God anywhere in the world. The only one’s inside me. From your perspective, he’s inside you. That’s how it works, right?”

Vino sounded unconcerned, but Christopher saw a faint anger in his eyes.

“What I can’t forgive—is when this strength of mine gets tidied away as a ‘miracle’ or a ‘present from God.’ Do you think I didn’t put in any effort to get this power or something?”

The hand that covered his throat gradually tightened, and little by little, Christopher’s neck started to creak.

“A ritual to summon and control the god inside you—that’s what ‘effort’ is, right? I never skipped that ritual. That’s all it is... And? Do you admit you lost?”

In response to those abrupt words, Christopher smiled and lashed out with his arm, trying to drive the blade of his knife-gun into Vino’s head.

“Fair enough.”

In the next moment, the hand on Christopher’s throat tightened, then drew a half circle, slamming the back of his head into the uppermost part of Mist Wall.



“Gah...!”

At the end, just as Christopher was blacking out, he heard Vino’s quiet murmur.

“Don’t worry. Compared with me—you’re way closer to nature.”

When he heard that, Christopher tried to say something...but his voice was much too faint, and it didn’t reach Vino’s ears.



The sky-view restaurant Babel “Uuuhn... Are you okay, Ennis?”

“...Yeees.”

The people who’d been thrown by the hot wind that had followed the explosion picked themselves up, checking to make sure the others were all right.

“Mggrh, you okay, Jacuzzi, Nice?”

“...I think we’re done for.”

“Meep...”

Donny had shielded Jacuzzi and Nice from the blast, but in the process, they’d been squashed by his body, and it would be a little while before they could get up again.

Maria had slashed sideways with Murasámia, trying to cut the blast, and she’d managed to slice through a portion of the air currents splendidly—but of course she’d been sent flying, and she was stretched out in a corner of the room with Isaac and Miria.

“That fink Dallas... What’s he trying to pull?”

Getting to his feet, Firo scanned his surroundings. Most of the tables had been toppled by the blast wind, and a few of the tablecloths had caught fire.

He’d just assumed Dallas would be gone without a trace, but, possibly due to the qualities of the bomb, he was lying near the elevators, and his body was nearly whole. Even so, since some of him was missing, it seemed as though it would be a while before he recovered.

Meanwhile, on the opposite side, by the window, two figures lay on the floor.

From the looks of it, they were Tim and Adele. Before Firo could head over to them, Tim slowly sat up.

“Dammit... Dallas...”

His whole body was pulsing like his heart, and it hurt to breathe.

The blast wind seemed to have banged him up all over, but he had almost no burns from the flames.

Did I luck out?

Tim tried to get to his feet, but his legs still weren’t moving well. It looked as if he’d need to sit quietly for a little while longer.

Most of the flames from the explosion seemed to have been sucked out through the broken window, and while tablecloths and patches of carpet were burning here and there, there didn’t seem to be much danger that it would turn into a real fire at this point.

“Adele... Are you okay? ...!”

When he looked at Adele, who was lying beside him, Tim gulped.

The clothes on her back had been scorched away in places, and he could see several awful burns on her back and arms.

“Oh hell... And she... She was already injured...”

At that point, Tim started to wonder why Adele had burns when he didn’t.

Wait... Did she protect me?

When he heard the woman’s delirious murmur, his guess became certainty.

“Am...I...not...use...less...? Did I...help...?”

“You utter moron...”

Lamia tended to act separately from Larva more often than not, and Adele had been the only member of the team who was directly responsible to Tim. Even if they had known each other for a pretty long time, there was no reason for her to shield him.

She'd probably been pushed to act by the trauma of being in Lamia's unique position.

That was what Tim thought, but at this point, it didn't matter.

Intending to help Adele up somehow, he went closer, dragging his upper body across the floor in a crawl, but— —somebody's foot stomped down hard on his arm.

"Gahk...! Dallas...!"

When Tim tipped his head upward, there was Dallas, his eyes charged with pure bloodthirstiness.

More than half the clothes on his upper body had been blown off, and there were several burn marks on his trousers, too.

"At times like this...being immortal is great, ain't it? I get to retire from being a loser a lot faster than you losers."

"Did having us work you like a carthorse tick you off that much?"

"I don't give a shit about that... I'll never forgive anybody who messes with Eve or anybody who tries it. That's all."

"...In that case, why did you come back? Wouldn't it have been easier to take your kid sister and run?"

Tim's question was loaded with sarcasm, and as Dallas answered, he averted his eyes in exasperation.

"I couldn't...think of any way to protect her other than killing. That's all it was."

"Good grief... You're a bigger scumbag than I thought you were."

"Quiet."

Spitting the word out, with no hesitation, Dallas kicked Tim in the stomach.

"Gahk...!"

Then, grabbing Tim's and Adele's arms—he stepped out through the broken window.

Since the entire wall had been glass, there was no difference in level between the room's interior and the edge outside. Step-by-step, dragging the other two, Dallas steadily made for the white precipice.



“Christopher...!”

Watching until his partner had blacked out, Chi groaned, calling his name. He ran into the fray in the midst of the strange weather that was a mixture of sun and rain, readying to face Vino, his expression stern.

“That’s enough, isn’t it?”

“...You didn’t help. When those rings came flying at me, I figured you’d jump me along with them.”

“If this had been a job, I would have. If you intend to finish Christopher off, I’ll do it now.”

Chi fixed him with a sharp glare. Vino had shown overwhelming strength, but he wasn’t the least bit daunted by him.

Taking that look coolly, Vino gave Chi a light smile.

“Don’t look so scary. If this had been a job, I would’ve killed him, too, but... You people work for Chané’s old man, right? I can’t just end you out of hand.”

“What...?”

Chi didn’t understand what the other guy meant, and his expression was dubious, but...

A moment later, Chané returned from checking on the situation below.

“Hey. How was it, Chané?”

“_____”

“I see; Firo and Jacuzzi’s group are safe, huh? That’s fine, then.”

Satisfying himself regarding the safety of his own “relatives”—and no one else—by checking Chané’s eyes, Vino hauled Christopher up from where he lay at his feet and threw him at Chi.

Dexterously catching Christopher, who was like a puppet with cut strings, Chi

skillfully slung his pal's body over his shoulder.

"...What on earth are you people?"

After muttering that one phrase, Chi gazed at Chané's eyes as if trying to confirm something—and realized the truth.

Shining golden eyes, deep and clear.

Remembering a man whose eyes were that same color, Chi narrowed his own eyes slightly and spoke.

"Ah... I thought I'd heard the name 'Chané' somewhere before."

If the information the twins gave us long ago is accurate, then this guy is Vino, hmm?

"I see."

Satisfied with the reasons behind the man's strength, Chi quietly turned his back on Vino.

As he did, he was privately working out how to kill this monster the next time they faced off.

Once he'd watched his enemy walk away without saying a word, Vino gave Chané a relaxed smile.

"That weird dame's voice disappeared somewhere in there, and the flying rings aren't coming anymore... It's probably safe to assume this one's over, right?"

After making sure Chi was completely out of sight, Vino turned to Chané and murmured, sounding entertained: "I think the world's pretty small—but that does mean it's pretty deep, doesn't it, Chané?"

"...?"

"If that fanged fella had had a decent weapon and used it well..."

Thinking back over the recent death match, Claire paid his opponent the highest possible compliment: "...I might've broken out in a cold sweat, at least."



The sky-view restaurant Babel "Hey, Isaac, snap out of it."

“You too, Miria... Are you all right?”

Isaac and Miria had been lying in a corner of the restaurant.

When Firo and Ennis pulled them into sitting positions and slapped their cheeks, they managed to regain consciousness.

“Unnhn... What was that? Did somebody do an escape routine or something?”

“*Koff*... Yes, that was a big explosion.”

When he was sure the two of them were their usual selves, Firo looked around the restaurant again—and noticed that something felt very wrong.

Dallas?!

He’d figured it would take a while longer for Dallas to recover, but he was already fully healed up and conscious—and he was just about to pitch Tim and Adele out the window.

“...You little—!”

He didn’t really know the two, but he couldn’t just watch Dallas murder somebody.

However, the moment he launched himself into a run, he realized there was another figure standing behind Dallas.

“That’s—Claire’s friend, the one who’s been hanging around here for a while. The scissors guy...”

Just as Firo thought this, the “scissors guy” raised the pair of big shears he held high in the air—and *slowly* sank them into Dallas’s exposed back.

So this is it, huh?

Tim had half steeled himself already, but abruptly, he realized the hand that had grabbed his arm had left it.

“...?”

“...Gahk...gah...kkhka kh .”

“...I’m sorry. You’re...Dallas, right?”

Tick spoke, not in his usual easygoing way, but in a voice that sounded rather grave.

He held a pair of scissors in his right hand, and the tips of the blades had accurately pierced a portion of Dallas's spinal cord.

"You basta— Wh-why...? 'Snone of your business..."

Dallas's growl sounded vengeful, and as Tick responded, he looked sad.

"...I'm sorry. I know what you're feeling really, really well. I also know that if your precious little sister got taken hostage, you'd never forgive the people who did it."

"Th...then why...?"

"That's why—I can't forgive you, either. *When someone tries to kill my little brother*, I can't just pretend I'm not seeing it."

——!!

The one who was most surprised by those words was the little brother in question: Tim, aka Tock Jefferson.

"Tick... Why...?! When did you...?"

When his brother asked that question, eyes wide, the set of Tick's lips relaxed just a little.

"Yesterday. When I saw you at Jacuzzi's house, I knew riiight away."

"! But then... Why?!"

"Hey...scu m bags... Don't you ig nore m—"

As the brothers talked, Dallas tried to reach for the scissors with his right arm, which he could still move a bit.

As he did so, Tick took another pair of shears from his waist, stabbed them into a certain spot on Dallas's right shoulder, and twisted them in lightly.

"Ah ah ah... Ah."

Immediately, Dallas's right arm fell, dangling limply, and went perfectly still.

"I'm sorry. Please take your anger out on me."

Hanging his head slightly, Tick took a step forward.

Dallas's legs moved jerkily, like the feet of a marionette, taking a step toward the edge of the building.

"Ah, that's right. When I ran into you, Tock, I wanted to celebrate right away, but you were calling yourself Tim, and when I saw your clothes and things, it made me think, 'I bet he wants to get rid of his past...' So I thought I shouldn't hold you back... I was going to just keep pretending I didn't know, forever and ever."

"...Mind your own business, Tick. I just—wanted to sever my ties with you people..."

At his brother's words, Tick smiled a little sadly.

"I'm the other way around. I've done all sorts of things because I wanted to know about the bonds between people, and about family ties, but...in the end, all I learned to see was—"

Leaving the shears he'd twisted into Dallas's right shoulder where they were, Tick took out another pair of scissors and stabbed them into the left side of Dallas's lower back.

"Ah ah ah ah ah ah... Ah... Ah..."

It was possible his lungs weren't working well: The only thing escaping Dallas's lips was a weird, drawn-out sound.

"—where to cut in order to stop certain body parts from moving. Things like that."

When he'd said that much, Tick took another step forward, circling around to Dallas's side, and turned the guy's face toward himself.

"Look at me, please."

Showing him his face, Tick quietly spoke to Dallas.

The sunlight that lanced through the breaks in the clouds illuminated Tick's face brightly.

His expression held both sorrow and joy, and due to its squinty eyes, once you

saw it, his face wasn't the sort you'd manage to forget easily.

"The one who's hurting you right now, and the one who's about to push you over the edge, is me. Tock... Tim has nothing to do with it. I'm Tick. Tick Jefferson. Resent me more than anybody else, Dallas..."

Then he fell silent, and after a pause, he spoke his final words.

"If you go after Tim again...*I know what Eve looks like and where she lives.*"

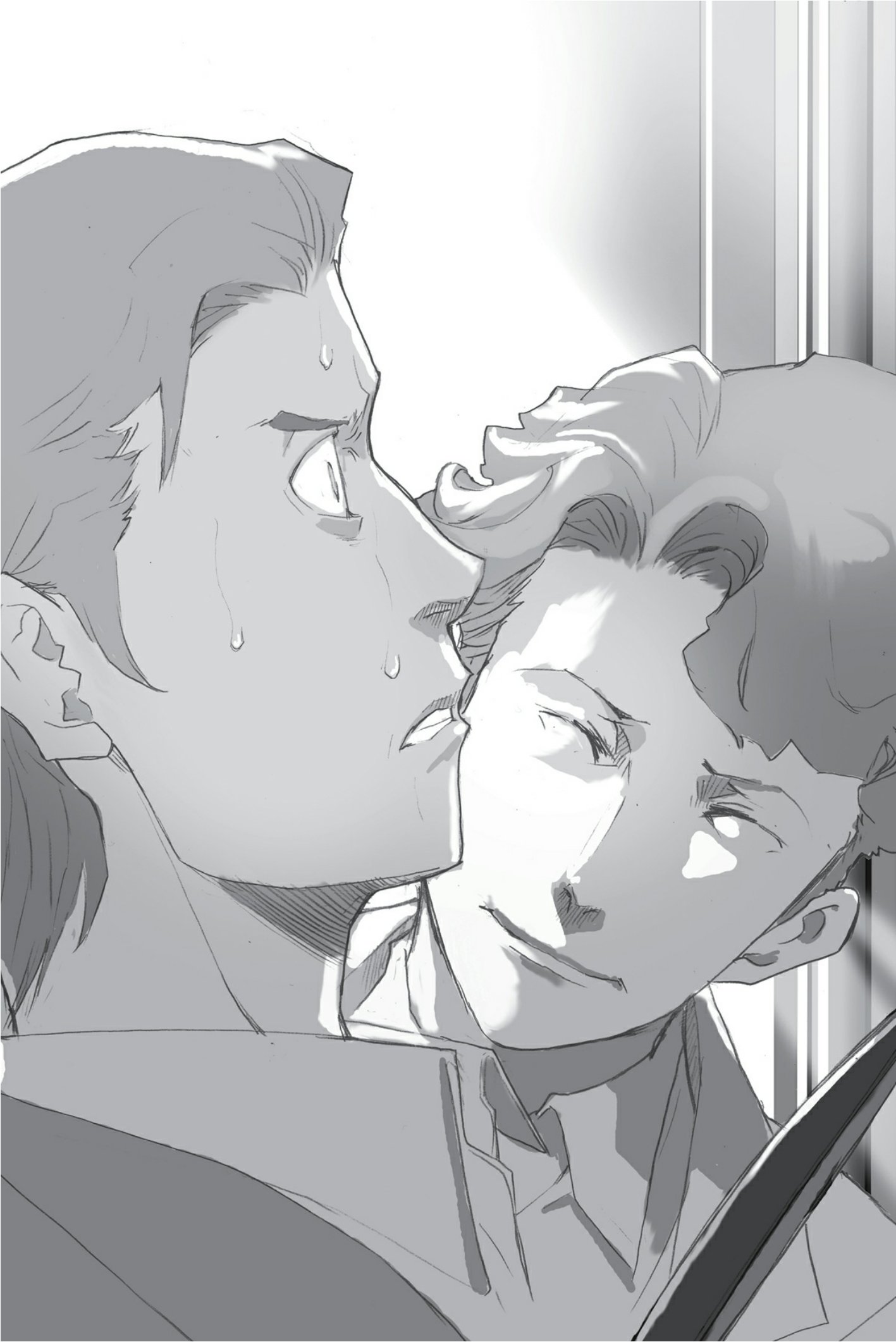
Instantly, Dallas's expression changed dramatically.

Up until then, his face had been filled with anger and the murderous intent that went with it, but now the anger disappeared completely—and all that remained was an unadulterated intent to kill.

Seeing the change in his expression, Tick nodded, looking satisfied.

"I'm sorry... Thank you. Oh... Also, there's somebody waiting for you, down below..."

Adding that comment as if he'd just remembered, Tim pulled the scissors out of Dallas's back and gave him a gentle push forward.



*

“When I look at you, I think I can sense family ties, just a little... I’m going to use them, though... The bonds between you and your sister... I’m sorry.”



“I am going to go after all!”

“Wait, wait, wait! It’s not safe, all right?! It’s dangerous!”

After the sudden explosion at Mist Wall, Eve had started insisting she was going inside, too.

“It’s fine! Your brother’s—you know! He can’t die, remember?!”

“But, but...”

As he desperately talked Eve down, Fang took another troubled look up at Mist Wall.

The fire and smoke didn’t appear to be spreading, and except for the scars from the blast, nothing seemed to have changed.

“It’s fine—look, things have already settled down. Besides, I don’t really get it, but the cops haven’t shown up, either.”

“...”

Eve finally seemed to have calmed down, and she stayed there with Fang, looking up at the white wall.

They’d been watching for about thirty seconds when it happened.

After the explosion, a small dot of some sort shot out.

“?”

The dot grew bigger and bigger, and as it did, its shape grew clearer.

Fang gazed at it for a little while—and then he realized the dot had arms and legs.

“...! Don’t loook!”

Even as he said it, he pulled Eve into a hug, completely blocking her vision.

A few seconds later, there was a noise as though someone had kicked in a corrugated tin door—and violent screams went up from the surrounding passersby.

Eve didn't know what had happened, and for a little while, she only stood there and trembled, but then... Timidly, she peeked past Fang's side at the scene in front of the building.

And what she saw there was—



Just after Tick had defenestrated Dallas, Chi came down from the top, carrying an unconscious Christopher.

The sack of potatoes didn't have any conspicuous external injuries, but he was out cold, and it seemed like it would be a while before he woke up on his own.

As soon as Chi got inside, he saw Tim and Adele, and his eyes went round.

"You too?! What happened?!"

"Never mind me. Take care of Adele."

At Tim's words, Chi thought hard for a minute. Then, as if he'd made up his mind, he shouted, "Sham! Hilton! Either's fine! Is there a twin here?!"

Chi's scream was anguished—and someone did respond.

Maybe he'd been hiding: A man appeared from the shadows of the kitchen.

"Huh? That guy... He didn't run?"

Seeing the figure, Jacuzzi spoke up, sounding startled.

It was the waiter who'd first seated Ronny at his group's table.

"You're...*Sham, huh?* Sorry, but help me carry Adele."

The waiter nodded wordlessly at Chi's instructions, then shouldered Adele, boarded the elevator with Chi, and rode it down.

As if to replace Chi's group, which had left mysteries in its wake, Chané and Vino descended from above, making it clear that things had been settled up there.

“Hmm? Where’s Dallas?”

“He went down fiiirst.”

“Oh.”

When they heard Tick indifferently report that fact to Vino, the people who knew what had happened got worried, wondering whether he might secretly be an incredibly nasty customer.

The fact that he wasn’t lying made them particularly uneasy, but Tick had already reverted to his usual expression.

Then, with no one left to run the situation, they naturally broke up and went their separate ways.

Since everyone who was being pursued by the security guards had gone downstairs ahead of the rest, the people who were still present were able to leave with a certain amount of leeway.

However—some of them didn’t feel so great.

“...Ennis, do you think that was true? The stuff they said earlier.”

“The stuff from...earlier?”

“You know, about how all the employees in this building are...”

“...If it is true, I don’t know if there’s anything we can do...”

In the elevator, Firo and Ennis were having a rather stiff, awkward conversation.

“Besides, that Lamia group... Claire ran them off today, so that’s all right, but... You think they’ll be back?”

“My...siblings.”

“Don’t worry about that.”

When Firo spoke, Ennis smiled at him.

“I know. I already have two wonderful brothers: you and Czes!”

“...”

Unable to genuinely approve of that answer, Firo looked down quietly.

Siblings... Brothers... Brothers... That's how Ennis thinks of me...? Agh...



“You’re not hurt, right, Chané?”

Once he’d made sure the elevator doors were closed, Vino spoke to his fiancée with a soft look in his eyes.

Chané nodded wordlessly, and silence descended in the closed room.

When they were about halfway down the building, Vino abruptly broke that silence.

“...Huey Laforet and Nebula, huh?”

“?”

“That red-eyed fella’s group, too... There was all sorts of stuff I didn’t get here. At times like this, it feels like I’m outside the world looking in, and it’s incredibly frustrating.”

He spoke as if he were talking to himself, and Chané listened, watching him with quiet eyes.

“I think it’s about time I got inside that world.”

Realizing what those words meant, Chané’s eyes widened slightly.

“Next time something happens—I’ll go pay your old man a visit, Chané.”

Visit the man who’d been put in a prison that would later be called “impregnable.” He’d said the words quite casually, and Chané nodded, not doubting them in the least.

“...Hmm? By the way, it feels like I’m forgetting something important...”

Unusually for him, Vino seemed puzzled. Chané only shook her head, looking mystified.



“Somehow...I feel like we got pulled into some sort of dream for an hour or so.”

“You’re right. I’m really worn out. I hope Nick and the others managed to get out of the building safely.”

“Mrrgh.”

Breathing a sigh of relief for the moment, Jacuzzi and the others boarded the elevator, preparing to head for their rendezvous point.

“By the way, I think I’m forgetting something...”

“You’re sure it isn’t Fang?”

“Ngah.”

“...You’re even more easygoing than Tick. *Well, never mind.* Your real business begins now.”

At the sound of the voice that spoke behind them, Jacuzzi’s group completely froze up.

Since they were petrified, they weren’t able to escape from the elevator before the doors shut.

Once the doors closed, in that sealed room, they fearfully looked back...

...and in the elevator, a long, long time began to pass.



As Tick and Maria lent him their shoulders, Tim stayed silent.

The atmosphere couldn’t have been worse, but Tick spoke to him without reading it.

“What are you going to do nooow, Tim?”

“Tock’s fine, brother.”

“Huh?! You two are brothers, amigo?!”

Maria had been out of it earlier, so Tick filled her in on the situation, then spoke to him again.

“Soooo, what are you going to do now, Tock?”

“I’ll...stick with what I’ve been doing. I’ll keep working for Mr. Huey. He may just be using me, but...someday—I’ll slash through my fate.”

“You can’t cut that, Tock.”

Tick smiled as he spoke, and Tock looked at him quizzically.

“There’s no such thing as being fated to be used by somebody else. No matter how hard you work at it, you can’t cut something that never existed, you know?”

“ ... ”

Looking at his older brother, who seemed as happy as ever, Tim began to wonder whether the one who’d pushed Dallas off the building back there had been somebody else entirely, but— Abruptly, something occurred to him, and he decided to ask his brother about it.

“Tick... Listen...”

“What, hmm?”

“Why did you kill Jimmy?”

Tim had decided he wanted to get to the bottom of his pet white rat’s murder, here and now.

However...his brother’s answer was one he’d never imagined.

“Oh, Jimmy? I wasn’t the one who killed him.”

“...Huh? Hey, hold on, Tick. In that case, why didn’t you say anything when it happened?”

“If I’d said it wasn’t me, you would have suspected me even moore, right?”

There was a short silence. Then Tim asked another question, looking for confirmation.

“Then, when I yelled at you and told you to give Jimmy back, why didn’t you argue?”

“Well, I thought, it would have been really nice if I could have given him back to you...”

Tim’s head was starting to hurt, but at the same time, he used that aching head and thought.

“It...really wasn’t you, Tick?”

“Nope. When I came home, the scissors were already like that.”

“ ... ”

“You lost me, amigos. Who’s Jimmy?”

Ignoring Maria, Tim kept thinking quietly.

Before he came to a conclusion for everything, the elevator reached the ground floor.

Tim carefully stepped out into the hall, only to find himself in a world where all was normal.

The ladies at the reception desk were talking away, wearing their usual customer-service smiles, and the security guards were gazing at the posters on the company walls, looking bored.

Employees walked past, down the middle of the hall, chatting with each other about their lunches, and it was as though the earlier uproar had really and truly *never been*.

He saw police cars stopped at the entrance, but apparently, they were there because of the restaurant explosion, not Christopher’s group’s massacre.

...Even though there had been quite a few regular members of the public who’d fled. Wondering just what sort of pressure was being put on the police, Tim remembered what Senator Beriam had said, and he shivered a little.

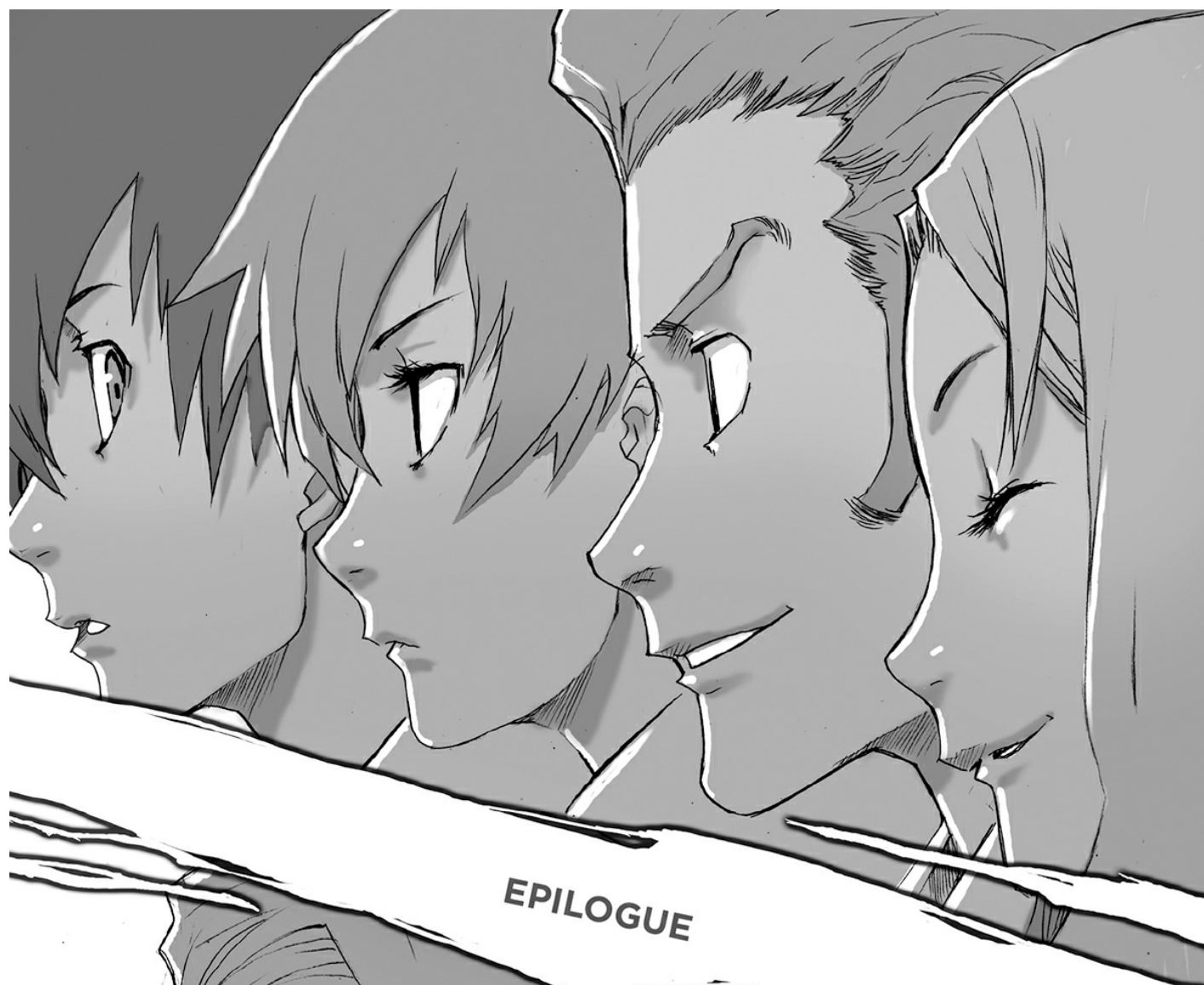
Still...all the Nebula employees in this hall were immortals.

There were no visible changes. Although, that made the knowledge of that fact all the more frightening.

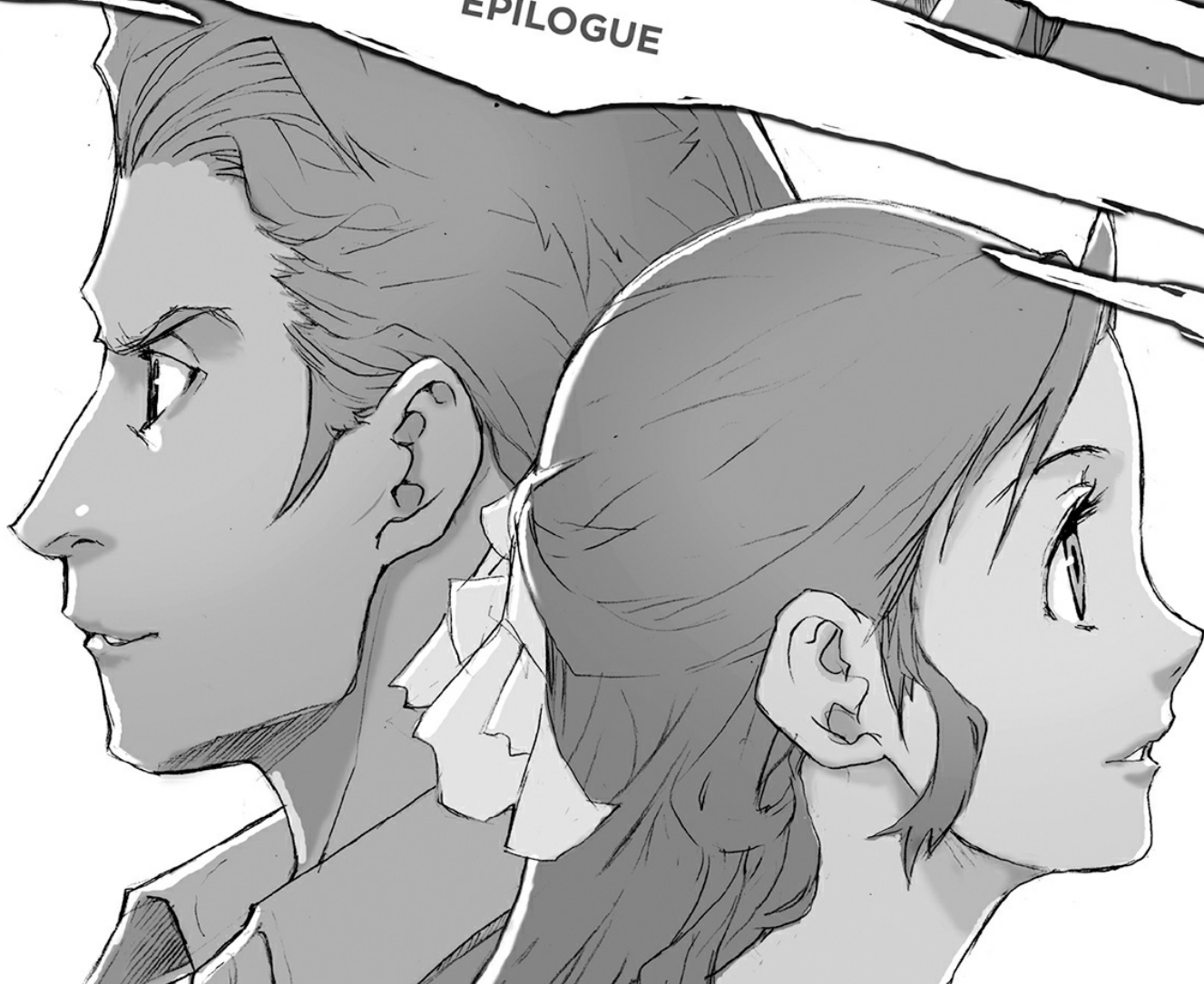
Huey had wanted lots of “failed immortals,” too. Were Nebula and Huey planning to use them for the same purpose?

No matter how he thought about it, he couldn’t find the answer. The eerie feeling just kept growing.

It was as if thick mist was covering a gathering of something alien, hiding it...



EPILOGUE



EPILOGUE

Little Italy Alveare

“And then, see, it was terrific! At the end, a Mexican magician split the clouds with a sword!”

“Yes, and the sun was shining!”

Isaac and Miria were talking to the Martillo Family members who’d gathered for lunch, bragging on and on about all the magic tricks they’d seen that morning.

However, most of the members said things like “Liar! Pull the other one!”; “I bet you guys were asleep and dreamed all that”; and “Maybe it was a magic trick that made your brains disappear” and wouldn’t listen to them.

“Good grief... That’s the problem with mugs who don’t understand how awesome magic tricks really are.”

“I bet one of these days a magician will come along and make the Statue of Liberty disappear!”

“Ha-ha-ha, if a guy like that shows up, I’ll swim around Manhattan for ya.”

Thanks to that careless remark, several decades later, Pezzo would see hell—but that’s another story.

On hearing Isaac and Miria’s story about “the *katana* that split the clouds,” Maiza murmured to Ronny, who was stuffing his face with chicken on toast beside him.

“Ronny...that was you, wasn’t it?”

“Mmf. What do you mean?”

“Before noon, I thought that downpour cleared up in a very odd way, but...”

“...Magic tricks are incredible things.”

On hearing him evade the question in a way that didn't work as an evasion at all, Maiza heaved a rather large sigh.

“As a rule, clever hawks hide their talons, you know.”

“If they hide them so much they forget how to use them, they've lost everything.”

“No demon has ever used his power so liberally, in such self-centered ways. It's unheard of.”

“Breaking new ground is a good thing.”

As they continued quipping back and forth, Firo and Ennis entered the restaurant together.

“Well, well. If it isn't Firo, who didn't waste the least bit of worry on me when we were all caught up in that explosion.”

“Oh, Ronny... S-stop it, sir; I really am sorry about that! B-by the way, how did the business with the kids from Chicago turn out?”

“Ah, that. They won't pledge their allegiance, but they agreed to make regular payments to us.”

“Huh? Really? But they're the kind of people who'd take Dallas on as a friend and kidnap you and Ennis, remember?”

At this from Firo, the executives in the restaurant put their heads together and started whispering to each other.

“Hey... Firo still doesn't know Isaac's the one who sent that letter?”

“Doesn't sound like it.”

“Well, when he finds out, this oughta be good...”

“?”

The surrounding atmosphere concerned him, but Firo sat at the counter and ordered sandwiches for himself and Ennis.

Then, next to him, Ennis murmured softly, “Um...the Lamia and Nebula

incidents... Should we tell Maiza...?”

“Let’s keep it to ourselves for now... Either way, Szilard’s a wall we’ll have to get over on our own.”

“Yes...”

“Still, twelve hundred people... That’s rough.”

The pair had grown a little gloomy, and Isaac and Miria poked their faces in between them.

“What was that about twelve hundred people? Is it the one about how, when men go outside, they have twelve hundred enemies?”

“Or is it that you’ve got twelve hundred subordinates, Firo?”

“Maybe they’re his family.”

“Yes, or maybe that’s how many lovers he has! Eeeek! Firo, you playboy!”

The things the couple said were as screwy as ever. When Firo spoke to them, he sounded a bit awkward.

“Hey...thanks for helping me out yesterday... Also...uh. I’m really sorry about the dominos.”

“Dominos? Did something happen to the dominos?”

“Oh, do you want to play dominos?!”

“Waaaaaagh, they completely forgot.”

Embarrassed about the fact that he’d turned bright red and apologized, he flushed an even deeper red.

“Oh, right. We had a favor to ask you, Firo.”

“What?”

He prompted him to go on, and Isaac spoke, sounding confident.

“Say ‘*gyafun*’!”

“Yes, *gyafun*!”

“...What’s a *gyafun*?”

All he'd done was ask them what the word meant, but Isaac and Miria got so excited at finally making him say *uncle* in Japanese, you'd have thought they'd killed a giant.

"Hooray! He said it!"

"Yes, what a coup!"

"...After talking with you guys, I can follow most people who flunk at conversations. It's kind of a problem."

Remembering Christopher, Firo took a big bite of the sandwich that had been brought out to him.

"By the way, Firo, I heard all about it! When Ennis disappeared, you went tearing around in the pouring rain without an umbrella, right?!"

"Yes, and you were shouting, 'Ennis, Ennis!' weren't you?"

Bwuff.

Firo spat out his half-eaten sandwich as Isaac and Miria kept elbowing him by turns.

When he sneaked a glance to the side, Ennis was looking at him, her expression startled.

This could not be worse.

"Who told you?"

"Oh, no you don't—we promised Czes we wouldn't reveal our source!"

"Yes, it's a promise between men!"

"Czeeeeeeeeees!"

As she watched Firo sprint off in search of his roommate, Seina spoke up, sounding mildly disgusted.

"For heaven's sake. I don't know why you did it, but...I hear you ran out in all that rain, too, calling for Firo."

"St-stop it, please..."

"Be honest now. What exactly is Firo to you?"

In response to Seina's indelicate question...Ennis gave a soft smile and answered sincerely, from the bottom of her heart.

"Firo is my precious...*family*."



The mansion

At the time, I felt vague and dreamy.

Sort of like I was floating in space.

Where am I?

Am I in the water again?

Or did I get shoved off something else?

Dammit, all my memories are ugly.

But...I remember this feeling.

I remember it, but I forget where it was from.

...Even though I remember being in that oil drum and the moment I fell off that tall building real vividly.

Especially falling off the building, because that just happened.

That bastard.

That squinty-eyed bastard.

I'll make him pay for that.

Eve— What's he gonna do to Eve?!

Dammit, who is it?! Who made Eve cry so much her face got all puffy like this?

Who put those dark circles under her eyes?!

Hey, Eve, who was it? Who made you cry?

I promised, remember? I said I'd protect you for sure.

C'mon, Eve, who was it? Who?

Who's the loser that's making you cry—?

“Dallas!”

When I saw Eve clinging to me, I finally realized this was reality.

It's a real classy bed. How many years has it been since I slept in a bed you could sink into like this?

C'mon, this kind of bed doesn't suit me.

Look, I can tell you haven't been sleeping. Push me out of this thing and you sleep here.

“I was terribly—terribly worried!”

Oh... So I'm the one who made her cry, huh?

“I'm so glad... Truly... Dallas...!”

I really am a total bastard.

“Uh...”

It's okay; my voice works.

“What, Dallas?”

“Sorry, I... I broke that promise and fought again.”

“...”

“But, look, I'll keep that other promise...the one about protecting you, no matter what.”

Dummy. Don't cry.

...Don't cry.

If you cry because of me...

...I'll have to knock myself flying, see?

So don't cry.

C'mon, don't cry.

You're gonna make me start...



In the darkness

“What did Huey say?”

“He said that all responsibility lies with Tim this time. We get off without a reprimand.”

“Is that right. Well, thank you, Tim.”

“Where’s Adele?”

“They’d be able to trace us at a big hospital, so we’re having her transferred to a little place upstate. It belongs to a mummy-like person who wraps himself in gray cloth from head to toe. It’s the perfect hospital for us.”

“I see... Does it look like she’ll be able to return?”

“She seems to be getting a lot of flashbacks, so... Adele’s staying with Tim this time, too. We’ll just have to leave it to him.”

“I see. Well, we did go through hell in that laboratory, and that’s the truth. What are you going to do now? We already have a request for a side job; do you want to join us again?”

“I’ll— Hmm. I’ll think about it.”

“...Your opponent in the New York incident was too tough. That’s the second time you’ve lost, correct?”

“Right... I think it’s been about forty years since the other one. The fellow who broke all my teeth... What was his name again? It was the name of a river, wasn’t it...?”

“In any case, this wasn’t your first loss. Don’t worry about it.”

“Yeah. Yeah, you’re right... I’m going to take a little trip and commune with Nature...”

“Ah... What a pretty flower...”

In a lakeside warehouse district, Christopher was quietly gazing at a flower, fascinated.

“I never dreamed it would still be blooming... I assumed it would have

withered long ago.”

To think there was a flower still in bloom on that same spot, in the place where they’d done that job the previous week.

“Ha-ha, and the bloodstains are still here.”

Enjoying the situation around him, he crouched down in front of the flower again.

“So pretty...”

Christopher was genuinely charmed by the flower, and even when a shock ran through his back, he wasn’t able to register what had happened to him right away.

“Huh?”

Noticing that his back felt terribly hot, he reached around to touch it—and as he did so, another impact ran through him.

The heat promptly turned into pain, and as he realized that something was wrong, he sprang to his feet, turning around in the same motion.

“Eep!”

There was a familiar face there.

“Oh... It’s the guy who looked good with this flower.”

It was the undercover officer who’d hired Christopher’s group for that earlier job—and had ultimately been betrayed.

“Eee...”

“Did you stumble onto me by accident, while you were running around trying to get away?”

The agent’s knees were quaking. He was holding a bloody knife.

Seeing the color of his own blood as it dripped from its tip, Christopher muttered, sounding cross: “It’s the same color, and even so...”

“Dieeeeeaaaaaaaah!!”

The knife was thrust out vigorously. He caught the man’s wrist, twisted it back

—and pushed the tip into the agent's throat.

“Yee...agh——”

Slashing the man's throat, he looked at the blood that flowed from it and added one more comment.

“See? The same color. I wonder what the difference is.”

He snatched the knife out of the other guy's hands, then shoved it into him, near his heart.

When he saw the color that stained the man's chest, the fanged young guy murmured sadly.

“You know, I don't think there is any difference. But everybody else says there is. Subjectivity's a funny thing, isn't it?

“Even though we're the same.

“Even though we're the same.

“Even though we're the same.”

He stabbed the man's chest again and again, and before he knew it, he'd broken the tip of the knife.

“Oh, I'm sorry. Maybe we are different.”

Throwing the knife away in the direction of the lake, he spat the words at the man, whose eyes had gone dull long before.

“I'm...not that fragile.”

After he'd walked a little ways, he finally put a hand around behind his back.

“Ow-ow-ow-ow-ow.”

There was a wet, sticky sound, and fresh, flowing blood mixed with the nearly dried blood on his hand.

“Aaah... This seriously hurts. What'll I do?”

Smiling with embarrassment, Christopher quietly lay down, right where he was.

“Well, damn. He got me. Ha-ha-ha.”

“Ah, what’ll I do...? I don’t wanna die. ‘I got stabbed because I was admiring a flower.’ That’s just... You know?”

“Me and those twelve hundred immortals. I wonder which of us is unnatural.”

The light was gradually fading from Christopher’s red eyes.

“What’s the difference? Even I lived in the usual way—and when I’m dying, I don’t want to die... Somebody tell me... What is it? What’s the difference?”

While he kept thinking about what he lacked, trying to distract himself from his fear of death— —he saw a lone figure standing beside him.

Christopher looked the figure up and down, then smiled gently and spoke to it.

“Hi. Will you be my friend?”



In the dark

“...‘I’m familiar with your past achievements, and the fault here is mine as well, for leaving the matter to the members of Lamia without informing you of its possibilities. For that reason, for now, any punishment will be deferred’...he says.”

“Sham. Tell Huey there’s something I want to ask him.”

“...‘What is it?’ ...he says.”

“Huey...did you—Did you kill my Jimmy?”

“...‘What are you talking about?’ ...he says.”

“The only ones who knew about Jimmy were my father, my brother—and you. Father didn’t have the courage to kill a living thing, and my brother says he didn’t do it...”

“...‘If you believe that, then that is your world. You may do as you like’...he says.”

“I see...”

“...‘You doubt me completely, and yet you still pledge your loyalty to me. I believe you may have grown a lot through this incident. That makes me happy, too’...he says.”

“Remember this, though, Huey Laforet. When I’ve gotten the world I want—you probably won’t be in it.”

“...‘Ha-ha-ha. That’s fine’...he says.”

After the twin had left, Tim quietly began to walk.

I won’t be a butterfly or a spider.

I want no part of a destiny of controlling others, or of being controlled.

Only... The blade that cuts the spider’s threads that have tangled around the butterfly—that isn’t what I want to be.

What I want is a world where that sort of thing definitely exists.

I’ll... In order to get the world I want, I’ll do anything.

No matter what, no matter what—



The Gandor Family

“And so I told her, amigos! I said, ‘I’ve got two *katanas*, meaning twice as much times two, and that’s four times!’”

OooooooooOOOOOOoooh.

“That’s just dumb!” “Wow!” “Even if you thought of it, who’d actually say it?!” “You’re something special, for sure!” “Amigo!” “Amigo!” “Amigo!”

Egged on by the obliging syndicate members, Maria was relating her heroic exploits over the past two days.

She was in a great mood, and she was just about to reenact what she’d done with her *katanas* at the time, when— “Maria. Come here, please.”

—Luck beckoned to her, smiling, from the depths of the office.

When she looked, Tick was already waiting in front of the desk.

“Ooh, what is it, Luck, what? Are you going to compliment me, too, amigo?”

When she went right up to his chair, feeling lighthearted, Luck spoke, still smiling.

“Well, it sounds as though you got pulled into all sorts of things over the past two days. That must have been quite tiring.”

“No, amigo, it was nothing, no problem!”

Maria returned Luck’s smile with a smile of her own, but Tick’s smile looked a bit troubled.

“Yes, that was awful. Really.”

“Like I said, amigo, it was nothing big.”

“You’re right: I expect it was nothing big.”

At that point, Maria noticed the vein standing out on Luck’s temple.

“Compared with the job I asked you to do, I am certain it was ‘nothing big.’”

“...Huh?”

“Ronny from the Martillos just called and filled me in on the specifics of the arrangement. He told me directly...”

Ignoring Maria, who was confused, Luck continued stating the facts in a detached fashion. “I had no idea they were friends of Claire’s... Claire also interceded, and it sounds as though they intend to plan their future behavior with a focus on the Martillos. Yes, not only Ronny, but Claire called and told us to treat them well. Long, long before I received a report from you two...”

Maria, who’d finally realized exactly what sort of situation this was, fell silent for a short while. Then, as if she’d been put on the spot, she murmured bashfully: “Well...”

“Don’t give me that ‘well’! No ‘wells’!”

After that, they were lectured for a solid hour, then told, “If you want your usual salaries, get out there and sell that information to the information broker”—and so the two of them were now headed for the DD newspaper.

“Mariaaaa.”

“Whaaat, Tiiick?”

“Right now, I think I almost understand what you’re feeling.”

“I think you probably do, but don’t go saying it out loud, okay? I’ll just feel pointless...”

The rain had let up, and Maria and Tick were trudging down the avenue. Tick had already found his usual smile again, and he was snipping and snicking away with his scissors, but Maria’s expression was gloomy, and she was sighing.

“Phooey. And here I thought things were looking up.”

“There’s no help for it. That really was our fault.”

After they’d walked a little farther, Maria asked Tick a question.

“Are you okay with this, though? You and your brother just went your separate ways. You didn’t even say good-bye properly.”

“Uh-huh. It’s fiiine.”

Tick had seen his brother off far too easily, and he’d learned that his heart was astonishingly dry.

I couldn’t even cry. Even though I’d finally seen him again...

Keeping those thoughts to himself, Tick smiled and looked up ahead.

“But Tock’s really impressive. He’s not like me; it seems like he’s living with his eyes focused on the things you can’t see, the way people should.”

“It looks like that’s made him several enemies, though, amigo. Like that Dallas guy.”

“He’ll be okay. I’m probably the one that man’s after now.”

“If that happens, I’ll protect you, so don’t worry, amigo!”

As she made that firm declaration, the smile finally returned to Maria’s face.

“All I’ve done is destroy the ties between dozens of people, hundreds of people, so I’m used to having them angry at meee. I’ve had folks say they’d curse me more than a hundred times, so I bet I’m already cuuursed. Maybe that

means I'll never be able to have a bond with anybody, not as long as I live."

"...What are you talking about?"

Maria looked into his face, seeming mystified, and in spite of himself, Tick stopped in his tracks.

As Tick looked bewildered, Maria confessed her feelings to him in her own unique way, without hesitating.

"You and I have been linked up for ages, Tick! Although it's up to you whether we're amigos or *novios*, friends or lovers!"

"Huh...?"

Maria's eyes abruptly turned serious, and she gazed into the depths of Tick's squinty ones.

"Or...is that something you can't believe, since you can't see it?"

"Well..."

When he didn't answer Maria's question, she smiled brightly.

"In that case, we'll just make it visible!"

"Huh?"

No sooner had she spoken than Maria took Tick's hand, holding it tightly with one of her own.

Then she broke into a run, headed for their destination.

"Maria, waaait! Fast, you're faaast."

"C'mon, c'mon! If you don't hurry, this hard-earned bond is gonna break, amigo!"

Flushing red, Tick channeled all the strength he had into his legs and broke into a run.

So as to be absolutely sure not to lose this human bond he'd finally obtained...

As if to liven things up, Maria drew a *katana* with one hand.

This time, it really was coincidence, but...

...beyond the tip of her drawn sword, the autumn sky peeked through a gap in the clouds.

Through the rift in the clouds, the sky was endlessly blue.

Blue.

Blue...



MIDDLEWORD

All right, this was the second part. Part II. The book that completes Tick and Maria's story.

The page count went up quite a bit, but this time around, I did manage to bring Tick and Maria's tale to a stopping point somehow.

—But. Those of you who read afterwords first may have thought “Huh?” when you looked for this page... Well, uh, things just kinda worked out that way.

For a variety of reasons, *Baccano!* has plunged into a rather long story.

One day in spring...

Chief Editor: “All right. I think it's about time to wrap up the 1930s volumes.”

Me: “Geeeeh! We're ending it?!”

Chief Editor: “No, no, I just meant it would be good to do lots of other things as well, like the modern 2001 volume. That means we should bring the 1930s section to a stopping place.”

Me: “Geeeeh! So we *are* ending it, in a roundabout way?!”

Chief Editor: “No. Listen to me. Besides, in any case, there's a limit to the 1930s.”

Me: “I see. But I still have a ton of things I want to do during the thirties.”

Chief Editor: “About how many?”

Me: “Let's see, I've got about ten plots... Aah! There aren't enough years?!”

...And so (?), we're finally getting to the crux of the 1930s volumes: the Huey Laforet arc. Or actually, we're already in it. Chi, Leeza, and Beriam made their first appearances this time, and I hope you'll look forward to seeing what sort of story they end up as central figures in. Although they might not actually be central to it.

From this point on, I'd like to gradually write longer episodes for the *Baccano!* 1930s volumes, in parallel with standalone stories like this book. The developments will probably be a jumble of new characters and old ones, and I'll be very happy if you stick with me for a while longer.

Please look out for my other ongoing projects, too, including *DRRR!!*, *Vamp!*, the Etsusa Bridge series, and sundry others. Thanks muchly!

So, as the result of an idea from the chief editor, this afterword ended up in a pretty unique location. However, viewed objectively, was this format going to be acceptable?

On that note, we got a comment from this gentleman, who's an authority on afterwords!

Hello and good afternoon. This is Que Itchy Shig Sour. It's actually Keiichi Sigsawa, but this computer decided it should be spelled the other way. Thanks for your understanding.

Somebody's just stolen Dengeki Bunko's first "middleword" from me, and I could not possibly be more ticked.

I am about to challenge Mr. Narita to a fight, and once I magnificently vanquish him, this book will not be published.

I hope you'll all look forward to it. All right, bra ring get! I mean, bring it!

Hunh?

This has been Keiichi Sigsawa.

Hmm?

I wasn't sure how to respond to this comment, and it made me want to do a little involuntary happy dance, but it is you—you, dear reader!—who will have to figure out the meaning of that mysterious "middleword" term!

So what is this afterword-middleword business? Well, just make sure to keep your eyes peeled and not miss anything until you get to the last page.

And so, Mr. Keiichi Sigsawa, thank you very much!

For this volume's author photo, I got help from Shoutarou Mizuki of Fujimi Mystery Bunko. It's a joint project with Mizuki's newest book, which goes on sale on November 10, the same day as this volume! Thank you very much for the first-ever Dengeki and Fuji-Myst collaborative afterword (!)! Let's try for a synergistic sales effect! On that note, please look out for *Find the Half Dollar* from Fujimi Mystery Bunko, too! ...Is it okay to do this?

I'd also like to extend my deepest gratitude to the chief editor and the rest of the staff; to my friends and acquaintances, including everyone in S City; to Mr. Katsumi Enami, who drew fantastic illustrations in spite of his jam-packed schedule; and to all the readers. Thank you very much!

September 2004

While shadily gazing at shady images from shady movies and anime with everybody and laughing shadily.

Ryohgo Narita GO TO NEXT YEAR→



**DIGRESSION,
OR PROLOGUE
TO WHAT'S
NEXT I
THE
ETERNAL
ONE**

DIGRESSION, OR PROLOGUE TO WHAT'S NEXT I

THE ETERNAL ONE

In San Francisco Bay, there was a small island—less than twenty-two acres in area—just offshore.

Most of the island was bare rock, and its coastline was made of steep cliffs all the way around. On its top sat buildings made of concrete.

The island was called Alcatraz, a word that meant “the pelicans,” but it was shrouded in a solemn atmosphere that didn’t suit the name.

Although the island had once been completely undeveloped, after the gold rush, ground had been broken for the construction of a fortress to protect San Francisco. It was reinforced further during the Civil War and was ultimately made over into a maritime fort equipped with 111 long cannons and Rodman guns, which were, at the time, cutting-edge technology.

Starting in the Civil War era, military criminals were held on Alcatraz Island.

Even after its role as a fort had ended, the island’s facilities were used to jail soldiers who’d committed crimes, war criminals, and American Indians who’d been captured during internal disputes.

The stronghold that had been created to guard against external enemies now became a facility that kept others from escaping. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the island had taken the shape of a full-fledged military prison.

Deep inside that prison, at the end of a cellblock with a long corridor that would later be nicknamed “Broadway,” storerooms under the cells had been remodeled into a group of solitary confinement cells known as “the Dungeon”...

...And even farther down...in the very depths of the prison, in a place that wasn’t recorded on any layout drawings inside the facility— —there *he* was.

A special cell, built for just one man.

It was about the size of a hotel room, too spacious to really call a “cell.”

In exchange, the only facilities in the room were minimal—a bed and running water—and as with the other cells, the only small articles in sight were things like soap and a tin cup. The size of the room served to make the atmosphere several times more desolate: That was the sort of cell it was.

Just a few of the prison guards were allowed access to this area, and its occupant passed the time quietly, ever so quietly.

In this bleak jail, which never saw the sun, the man sat on the bed, gazing into space.

His eyes weren't vacant. He was focused on a single spot, with clear purpose.

“I was keeping a journal, mentally.”

Abruptly, the man spoke.

His eyes were still watching the same spot; it seemed as though he was speaking to the room itself.

No guard was visible outside the cell.

Naturally, there were no other prisoners inside it.

“Before, through ‘bargaining,’ I was able to read books and newspapers at will...but the management's grown stricter, you see. They confiscated all of them.”

Even so, the man kept speaking.

He wasn't talking to himself. His speech was obviously directed at someone else, and it echoed clearly off the cell walls.

“Warden James Johnston, who arrived after the management of this prison was transferred to the Department of Justice... He's a pretty sharp fellow. In terms of hygiene and meals, he gives the greatest consideration possible to the prisoners, and in exchange, prisoner management is dreadfully thorough. I imagine legends that this jail is ‘escape-proof’ will follow it far into the future.”

“I didn't come here to listen to you whine.”

An impossible response echoed in the cell—and then the air rippled.

“Well, never mind.”

The formless “presence” that had filled the area for the past few minutes converged in front of the man, who was sitting on the bed.

The man blinked once, and as he did so, the presence morphed into the figure of a man in a suit: Ronny Schiatto.

“It’s been a long time, Huey Laforet. I don’t think we’ve met face-to-face since the ship.”

When he heard his name, Huey finally shifted his gaze, directing a genuinely happy smile at the tall man who stood there, looking down at him.

“Ah... You remembered my name. Although I don’t remember ever telling you what it was...”

“Maiza’s talked my ear off about you. From the fact that you aren’t shaken by my visit, I assume you’ve been watching me as well.”

“...Initially, I was watching Maiza. I found you by accident, demon... Or, no: Ronny Schiatto. Is that your real name? Immortals aren’t able to give false names to each other... Although I’d only have your word regarding whether you, a demon, need to obey that restriction.”

Huey had begun speaking with deliberate politeness. In response to the tease, Ronny spoke expressionlessly.

“I’m Elmer C. Albatross.”

“...?”

He abruptly introduced himself by the name of a person they already knew.

Naturally, Huey was aware he wasn’t looking at Elmer.

For the first time, his smile faded, and as if in exchange, a smile appeared on Ronny’s face.

“...I gave you a false name, didn’t I?”

“Yes...”

“As additional testimony, Ronny Schiatto is my real name, in a way. Although it is a name I gave myself... Provided you believe what I say.”

There was a smile on Huey's lips, as if he was satisfied, but his eyes hadn't completely relaxed.

"Even if it is only his name, I'd rather you didn't use Elmer casually in experiments like that."

"Those don't sound like the words of a fellow who uses others' lives and livelihoods in experiments without batting an eye."

Ignoring the comment, Huey asked the other man indifferently, "That aside, what brings you here today? Private conversations are severely restricted in this prison. If a guard finds you here—"

"You're an exception to the rule, and you know it. Besides, I could take care of a guard or two for you."

"The things omnipotent beings say certainly are different. Although, for all that, you do sound very human."

The reserve finally left his eyes, and Huey tossed back an ironic response.

Ronny evaded the other man's question easily, then stated his real purpose in a matter-of-fact way.

"All right. Huey Laforet, *what is your objective?*"

"...Objective?"

"You're at war with Nebula, you're collecting the 'failed' liquor—what are you planning?"

In response to this question from the being he'd called "omnipotent," Huey tilted his head, intrigued.

"Why would you ask me a thing like that? You're a demon; all you'd need to do is read my mind."

"Uncultured oaf. That would be *boring*. Do you intend to bury my life in tedium?"

"..."

This extremely unreasonable answer confirmed for Huey, once again, that the other guy was a demon.

I see. Just what I'd expect from someone who presided over a "game" like granting the wish of the one who summoned him for free.

Even as he thought this, Huey continued to argue. "It wasn't tedious to march into a prison on the opposite side of the continent and ask the person in question for the answer directly?"

"The prospect of conversing with an eccentric like you makes it pretty interesting. Besides, we're far too short on time for me to take the trouble of transferring from train to car and applying to visit you officially."

"That's not fair. It really isn't. Your answers all hinge entirely on your own convenience."

Huey shook his head as if he was troubled, but his voice was in perfect good humor. "That's right; if I were to sum up your existence in one word, it would be—*cheater*. Yes, *cheater*. That's the only way to put it. You completely ignore the laws of physics, and you pull off feats that can only be described as magic as if they were common sense!"

He'd begun to speak a little emphatically, but then he immediately lowered his tone and agreeably answered Ronny's question. "My objective is an experiment to see what the beings known as 'immortals' can do. The end goal of that experiment is, Ronny Schiatto, to create a 'demon' such as yourself with my own hands—or *for me to personally become what you are*."

"...Do you think being me will make you popular with the ladies or something?"

It was a joke, clearly made to evade the issue, but Huey wasn't the least bit disconcerted.

On seeing this, the corners of Ronny's lips warped as if he was entertained.

"And? How is the experiment going?"

"At the very least...I have some idea of what you really are."

"...I'm merely a long-lived alchemist. I'm no demon."

"Those words are true, but not the whole truth. Isn't that right?"

Huey spoke as if he saw through everything, and Ronny responded with

silence.

“You aren’t a demon or a god—much less a simple alchemist... But no, I shouldn’t say more than that until I have the results of the experiment.”

For a short while after that, silence ruled the cell. Then, abruptly, Huey spoke.

“Still, this incident startled me as well. I never dreamed Nebula was being so reckless.”

“Did you order your hand-raised guinea pigs to slaughter everyone just to confirm that?”

“Well, I was very nearly certain already. The twins’ reports are always accurate.”

Chuckling, Huey spoke with utmost confidence.

“I wonder if they’ll be able to keep them under control. Now that they’re aware of immortality, not as a concept but as an actual experience. Individuals would be one thing, but nearly half of Nebula’s employees experienced it at once. Will they be able to use them fully? Well, I managed to annoy them a little; I’m now able to observe an interesting test subject like Dallas Genoard, and most importantly, Tim grew a lot during this affair... Enough to reveal his rebellious intentions to me.”

“‘All according to plan,’ you mean?”

As Ronny spoke, he sounded mildly disgusted. Huey nodded, looking satisfied.

“Yes. Almost everything happened according to someone’s plan, either mine or Nebula’s. However, there are several people who could upset our calculations. Claire Stanfield, for one, or the former Felix Walkens—or you yourself.”

“The most I’ve done lately is time a cloud break to match a sword draw. It startled some diners, but that’s all.”

“...The things omnipotent people do are quite different, aren’t they?”

Huey seemed to be thoroughly enjoying the current situation, and Ronny changed the subject, hitting him with some sarcasm as he did so.

“Still...Christopher’s crew, and your ‘twins’... You’re really making *practical use* of Szilard’s techniques, aren’t you?”

Ronny was pointing out, indirectly, that Huey had stolen Szilard’s research. Huey smiled as he responded.

“Will you take me to court as an industrial spy?”

“Suing a penniless jailbird is just a waste of time.”

“Jail, hmm... If we’re discussing jails, I’ve been in one for several centuries already.”

Getting up from the bed, Huey turned eyes that seemed to be fondly remembering distant days on the wall of his cell.

“Back then, on that ship, you shut us into a prison of time. Yes, there is no past, present, or future *here*. The flow of time merely forms a whirlpool.”

“...”

“What can immortals do? What possibilities do they hold? That’s all I’ve thought about. No matter how brilliant or virtuous they are, they can’t become gods who will deliver the world from its discontent. In order to save one person, several sacrifices must be made. Those are the limits of humans.”

“I wouldn’t make too light of humans if I were you.”

“Well, well. Those don’t sound like appropriate words for a demon...”

In the end, Ronny supplied Huey with one final piece of information.

“It’s not fair for me to be the only one learning things. Let me tell you one thing you aren’t likely to know.”

“What is it?”

“Are you familiar with a man named Ladd Russo?”

“Yes, he was...one of the *uncertain elements* in the Flying Pussyfoot experiment.”

As he used the phrase *uncertain elements*, Huey’s smile faded slightly.

It was as if he was displeased that the results of the experiment had been

disturbed.

“I hear he’s after your life, and they say he’s going to be transferred to this prison. Lucky you.”

“That information doesn’t make me the least bit happy. What’s lucky about it?”

“—You won’t get bored.”

Huey tried to raise his voice in protest, but it was too late. Abruptly, the air in the cell reverted to the way it had been before— —and settled down into a situation which was, in a way, extremely normal: The only presence was that of the prisoner.



It had been an hour since Ronny vanished from the oubliette.

And yet there was another figure in it besides Huey.

It wasn’t Ronny, of course. The silhouette was completely different from his.

“Say, Father? Father? Aren’t you bored now that they’ve taken your books away?”

The voice unmistakably belonged to a child. It was bright and innocent, and it sounded completely out of place in a prison.

“I’m not bored. People even come to talk to me, once in a while.”

As Huey answered, he lightly stroked the head of the figure in front of him.

Its black hair rustled softly, and golden eyes peeked out from between its bangs.

The figure was about the same height as Huey while he was seated in the chair, or maybe just a little taller. In combination with the voice, this made it clear that the individual was a child.

No matter what sort of plea bargain he made, there was no way he’d be allowed to let a child into his cell.

In other words, the island’s administrators weren’t aware of this situation.

“Father! Listen, listen! Guess what?! I met *my big sister!*”

“That’s wonderful, Leeza.”

On hearing her own father call her name, the little girl—Leeza—smiled happily.

Then her young, artless voice—the complete opposite of the mature one Christopher and the others had heard—echoed in the cell.

“Father, listen, I’m even stronger than Chané! I’m sure I am! If that Vino guy hadn’t been there, I know I could have killed her!”

At that, Huey gave a troubled smile and poked at Leeza’s head.

“None of that, now. I told you; you mustn’t kill your sister *yet*, remember?”

There was no anger in his warning, but Leeza shook her head, looking about to break down in tears.

“I-I’m sorry! I, I... Please, Father, forgive me; I won’t do it again, so forgive me!”

“Ha-ha, I’m not angry, Leeza.”

“Really?”

His daughter asked the question timidly, and he smiled kindly and stroked her cheek.

“Yes, really. Don’t worry.”

“You won’t hate me?”

“Now how could I hate my own daughter?”

His face was smiling, but Huey’s answer was indifferent, almost mechanical.

Leeza, however, didn’t register this. Her cheeks flushed pink, and she spoke to her father in her most coaxing voice.

“Say, Father...? Who’s more important to you, my sister or me?”

The girl’s question was tinged with unease, and Huey responded with an even kinder smile.

“You of course, Leeza.”

At her father’s answer, the girl said “Oh, I’m glad!” and flung herself into his

arms.



...And so she didn't notice.

When her father gave that answer, he hadn't been looking at the girl's face at all.

Huey's eyes were still gazing at that point in space, just as they had been before...

Today, as always, a lone immortal continued to deceive all of creation.

All the lab animals who were involved with him, the whole of the natural world—even himself.

An old memory rose in his heart.



"Huey. In this world, *there's nothing but justice and love*. That includes self-love, justice used to satisfy your desires, that sort of thing. In that case, what do you have to do to get everyone in the world to smile? ...There's a way. It's easy to say, but very, very hard to actually do."

"You've intrigued me."

"—You have to become a bad guy."

"Bad?"

"If the whole world is made up of justice clashing with justice, and there's absolutely no way to save everybody—then I'll have to become the world's lone 'evil.' I just need to visibly commit fouls big enough to outmaneuver all justices, one after another."

"...That's ridiculous."

"Makes you smile, doesn't it?"



Remembering that conversation with his good old friend, Huey murmured as if he were talking to himself.

"Say, Elmer... Am I ridiculous now? If you saw me, would you smile?"

His voice didn't reach the ears of the daughter who nestled close to him. It was simply drawn away, into the darkness of the cell.

Quietly.

Quietly...



**DIGRESSION,
OR PROLOGUE
TO WHAT'S
NEXT II
MONEY-
GRUBBER**

DIGRESSION, OR PROLOGUE TO WHAT'S NEXT II

MONEY-GRUBBER

"...Who's there?"

In a spacious study illuminated only by lamplight, a man murmured, seemingly to himself.

As if in response to his voice, a shape that had been shadowed until then stepped out into the light.

"You are about to die, so there's no need for you to know."

The slender shadow—Chi—muttered impassively, then took another step toward the man, his target.

"A...a hitman... Who hired you?"

The man asked his question in a stifled voice. Chi answered it with silence.

Multiple iron claws gleamed on both his hands, and his gaze was already fixed on his target's throat.

"W-wait, look, I'll pay twice—no, three times as much as your client! So..."

"Many people have tried that line. With my impulsive partner, it might be different, but soft soap like that doesn't work on me. That is all."

As Chi spoke, he shook his head, as if pitying the man who was clinging to life.

"Th-that's madness... Are you telling me you don't need money?!"

Startled, the man rose from his chair, and Chi accelerated all at once, closing the distance between them.

"Hmph... Money-grubber."

Chi raised his arm slightly, preparing to slit the man's throat as he passed.

However, just then—

“I see. That’s a shame.”

The man’s voice and face turned as merciless as ice.

“?!”

—Impact.

When Chi was just half a step from his target, hot pain assailed his shoulder, as though something in it had burst.

“Gahk...!”

As he bent backward, he noticed an abnormality in the room.

A small hole had been drilled in the window behind the man, and cracks ran out from its edges like a spider web.

...Sniper?!

As Chi bore up under the pain and tried to regain his balance, a pitch-black shadow fell over him.

“Wha...?!”

Before he could see who the figure was, its hand grabbed his arm.

He immediately tried to shake it off, but the hand stuck to him as firmly as a magnet, and on top of that...

My...my strength is...?

Even though it was his arm that was trapped, his legs felt weak.

Still not understanding what had happened, Chi lost his balance and was pinned to the floor.

He’d fallen on his back, and he felt something light touch his neck.

There had been a sword-shaped letter opener on the man’s desk. Its tip was now resting on Chi’s throat—and the sole of the black shadow’s shoe was lightly pressing down on its hilt to keep it from falling over.

He was putting the perfect amount of weight behind it, and the tip of the letter opener wasn’t hurting Chi.

Nevertheless, if the shadow pressed down even a little, that dull sharpness

would run right through his throat. Chi knew this, and his movements had been sealed completely.

More than the fear of death, he'd been awed by the overwhelming aura of intimidation the shadow radiated as it stepped on him through that letter opener.

After a moment's silence, the man—Senator Manfred Beriam—spoke quietly.

“Right... Don't kill him, Felix.”

“That's ‘former,’ Mr. Beriam,” the shadow answered languidly. “I sold that name to somebody else, ages ago. I know I told you that.”

“Then hurry up and get a new name for yourself.”

“I'm someone neither God nor the government will forgive. Being nameless is good enough.”

“It's inconvenient for me, though.”

Just then, there was a light rap at the window.

Beriam looked over at it. A man was standing there, holding a rifle with an abnormally long barrel.

He wore a long coat, and his eyes were covered with a black cloth. The cloth had a pattern that looked like gun sights drawn on it, and there were raw scars on the skin around it.

“How was that, hmm? I did a good job again, didn't I?”

“...Good enough. Nice work, Spike.”

“Heh-heh, well, you know... Convert that appreciation into cash, please.”

The sniper, who seemed to be blind, had a disagreeable smile on his lips.

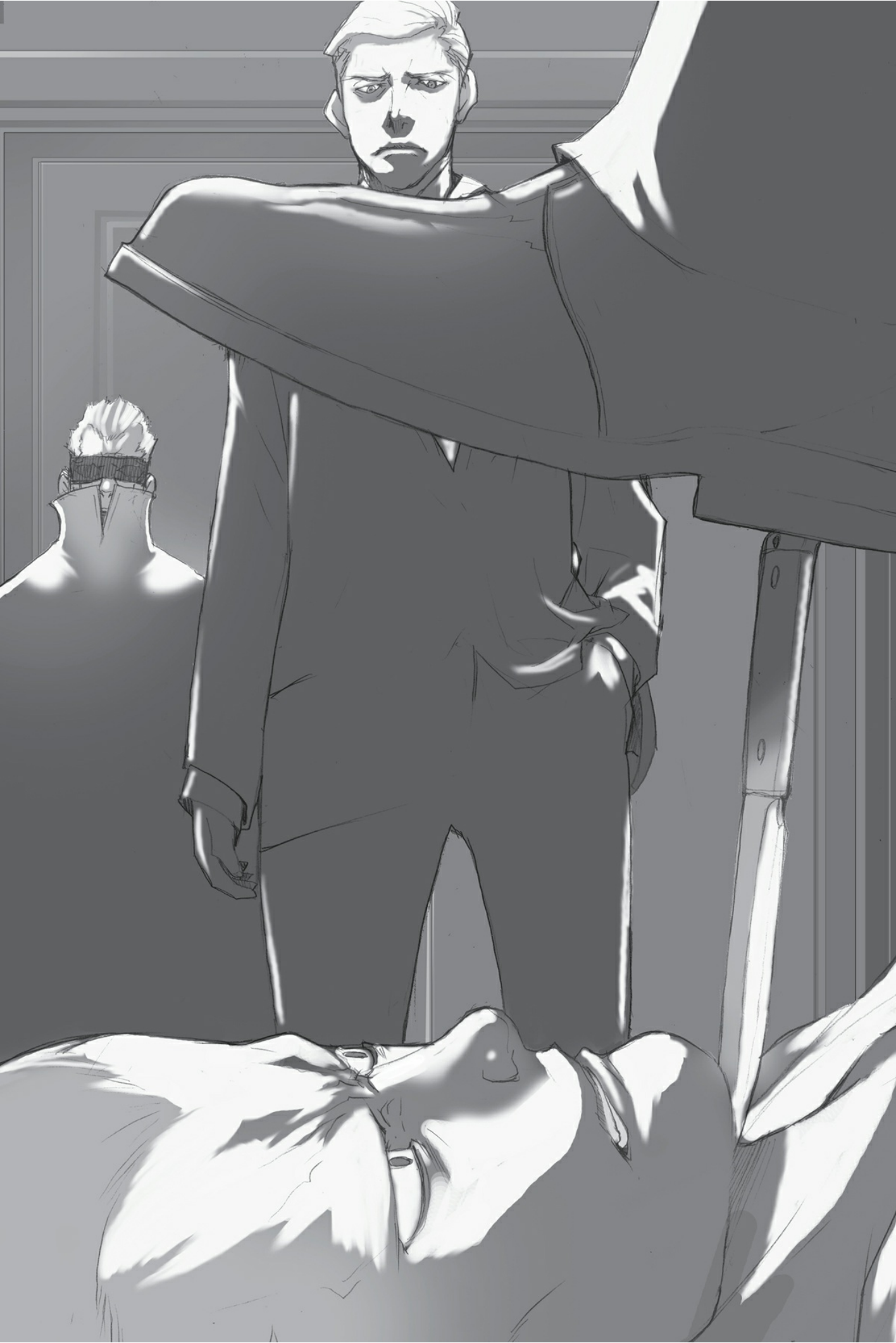
Ignoring the words of the gunman he'd employed, Beriam let his eyes fall to Chi, who lay on the floor.

“What do you think? I wouldn't call it almighty, but if you have money, there are certain things you can do. Employ men like these as your own ‘strength,’ for example.”

Chi accepted those words in silence, quietly awaiting his fate.

However, Beriam didn't attempt to exercise any sort of winner's privileges on Chi. He just kept talking.

"...Hong Chi-Mei. A member of Lamia, hmm?"



“?!”

Shuddering at the realization that his identity was known, Chi stared at the man in front of him.

Senator Beriam. He'd been at Mist Wall that day, and so he'd assumed the other man probably wasn't just a senator, but the man's access to information made Chi turn astonished eyes on him again.

“I don't know whether you're here on orders from Huey or if it was in your secondary line of work as a hitman. However...tell this to Huey, your creator.”

His eyes were endlessly cold, to the point where it seemed as if they'd freeze the surrounding air.

“This nation—it isn't a playground for *monsters* like you.”

In the study, after the former Felix and Spike had taken Chi away...

“I can't imagine Huey would send his underlings after me individually. Homer, the New York branch manager, is a possibility. He's a truly spineless man...”

Beriam leaned back in his leather-upholstered chair, gazing at the ceiling and murmuring to himself.

“Huey Laforet... Victor Talbot...”

He was talking to himself, but the words were spoken with definite listeners in mind.

“How much money did you gain from selling your souls to a demon? What authority did you acquire? You can't have gotten anything... You gained nothing. You merely discarded 'death.'”

When he'd muttered that much, there was a knock at the door to his study.

“Father, may I come in?”

“Oh, Mary. What's the matter? It's the middle of the night.”

The door opened quietly, and a girl whose face was still quite young peeked in.

“I heard a very loud noise a minute ago... I thought something might have

happened to you.”

“Ha-ha, it’s fine, Mary. Some books fell off the shelf, that’s all.”

On hearing that, the girl smiled, relieved that her father was safe. She didn’t seem to notice Chi’s blood on the black carpet. Feeling reassured, the girl ran to her father.

Catching his only daughter in a gentle embrace, Beriam thought to himself: *Money-grubber, hmm? Yes, I’ll accept that name.*

But I’ll show you, Huey Laforet.

Money and power. They’re vulgar, dirty-sounding words, but even so... These two strengths won’t yield to one such as you, who’s thrown away his humanity.

After all, these are the most symbolic strengths we’ve built in society.

Yes, I’ll show you. You people, who have discarded your humanity upon feeling its limits.

I’ll show you the power we humans have—

The strength of mere humans, who have no choice but to accept death as our destiny.

Reaffirming his resolution, Beriam hugged Mary’s shoulders tenderly.

As if to protect his beloved daughter from the madness that was to come...

Quietly.

Quietly...

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